BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LYONESSE*

JACK VANCE

FANTASMS & MAGICS

Jack Vance was born in 1920 and educated at the University of California, first as a mining engineer, then majoring in physics and finally in journalism. He has since had a varied career: his first story was written while he was serving in the US Merchant Marine during the Second World War. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, he contributed a variety of short stories to the science fiction and fantasy magazines of the time. His first published book was THE DYING EARTH (1950). Since then he has produced several series of novels – for example, the *Planet of Adventure*, *Durdane* and *Demon Princes* series – as well as various individual novels.

Jack Vance has won the two most coveted trophies of the science fiction world, the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award. He has also won the Edgar Award of the Mystery Writers of America for his novel THE MAN IN THE CAGE (1960). In addition, he has written scripts for television science fiction series.

Jack Vance's non-literary interests include blue-water sailing and early jazz. He lives in Oakland, California.

By the same author

The Five Gold Bands
Son of the Tree
Vandals of the Void
To Live Forever
Big Planet
The Languages of Pao
The Man in the Cage
The Dragon Masters
The Houses of Iszm
Future Tense
The Moon Moth
The Blue World
The Last Castle
Emphyrio
Trullion: Alastor 2262
Marune: Alastor 993
Wyst: Alastor 1716
Showboat World
The Best of Jack Vance
Lyonesse
Lyonesse II: The Green Pearl

Demon Princes series
Star King
The Killing Machine
The Palace of Love
The Face
The Book of Dreams

Durdane series
The Anome
The Brave Free Man
The Asutra

The Dying Earth series
The Dying Earth
The Eyes of the Overworld
Cugel's Saga
Rhialto the Marvellous

JACK VANCE

Fantasms and Magics

A Science Fantasy Adventure

GRAFTON BOOKS
A Division of the Collins Publishing Group

LONDON GLASGOW
TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND

Grafton Books
A Division of the Collins Publishing Group
8 Grafton Street, London W1X 3LA

Published by Grafton Books 1978
Reprinted 1987, 1988

Copyright © Jack Vance 1950, 1951, 1952, 1954, 1957, 1958, 1969

ISBN 0-583-12498-4

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Collins, Glasgow

Set in Pilgrim

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Contents

Foreword	7
The Miracle Workers	9
When the Five Moons Rise	84
Noise	99
The New Prime	113
Guyal of Sfere	139
The Men Return	183

Foreword

Strange things happen. Almost everyone has had some sort of brush with the paranormal, even the most resistant and skeptical of persons. The range of events is wide and only roughly amenable to classification. In olden times angels and demons were held responsible; to date no one has produced a more reasonable explanation.

Phenomena such as telepathy and poltergeists may well be manifestations of different and distinct principles: there may be two, three, four, or more such realms of knowledge, each at least as rich and intricate as physics or astronomy. There is little systematic study. Conventional scientists shy away from the field because they are, in fact, conventional; because they fear to compromise their careers; because the subject is difficult to get a grip on; because scientists are as susceptible to awe and eeriness as anyone else. So: the mysteries persist; the lore accumulates, and we know for sure no more than our remote ancestors, if as much.

The stories of this collection are by no means homogeneous, and are told from different perspectives and different moods. 'The New Prime,' strictly speaking, has no psionic or paranormal reference. 'The Men Return' toys with a somewhat recondite (and perhaps not wholly defensible) physical concept. 'The Miracle Workers' has a more definite psionic orientation, and makes at least a superficial inquiry into certain aspects and implications of telekinesis and demon-possession. I can't pretend to offer enlightenment; there isn't any to be had. The stories, in any event, were not conceived as argumentative vehicles, but simply reflect my own fascination with the vast and wonderful reaches of the unknown.

JACK VANCE

The Miracle Workers

I

The war party from Faide Keep moved eastward across the downs: a column of a hundred armored knights, five hundred foot soldiers, a train of wagons. In the lead rode Lord Faide, a tall man in his early maturity, spare and cat-like, with a sallow dyspeptic face. He sat in the ancestral car of the Faides, a boat-shaped vehicle floating two feet above the moss, and carried, in addition to his sword and dagger, his ancestral side weapons.

An hour before sunset a pair of scouts came racing back to the column, their club-headed horses loping like dogs. Lord Faide braked the motion of his car. Behind him the Faide kinsmen, the lesser knights, and the leather-capped foot soldiers halted; to the rear the baggage train and the high-wheeled wagons of the jinxmen creaked to a stop.

The scouts approached at breakneck speed, at the last instant flinging their horses sidewise. Long shaggy legs kicked out, padlike hooves plowed through the moss. The scouts jumped to the ground, ran forward. 'The way to Ballant Keep is blocked!'

Lord Faide rose in his seat, stood staring eastward over the gray-green downs. 'How many knights? How many men?'

'No knights, no men, Lord Faide. The First Folk have planted a forest between North and South Wildwood.'

Lord Faide stood a moment in reflection, then seated himself and pushed the control knob. The car wheezed, jerked, moved forward. The knights touched up their horses; the foot soldiers resumed their slouching gait. At the rear the baggage train creaked into motion, together with the six wagons of the jinxmen.

The sun, large, pale, and faintly pink, sank in the west. North Wildwood loomed down from the left, separated

from South Wildwood by an area of stony ground, only sparsely patched with moss. As the sun passed behind the horizon, the new planting became visible: a frail new growth connecting the tracts of woodland like a canal between two seas.

Lord Faide halted his car, stepped down to the moss. He appraised the landscape, then gave the signal to make camp. The wagons were ranged in a circle, the gear unloaded. Lord Faide watched the activity for a moment, eyes sharp and critical, then turned and walked out across the downs through the lavender and green twilight. Fifteen miles to the east his last enemy awaited him: Lord Ballant of Ballant Keep. Contemplating the next day's battle, Lord Faide felt reasonably confident of the outcome. His troops had been tempered by a dozen campaigns; his kinsmen were loyal and singlehearted. Hean Jinxman to Faide Keep was Hein Huss, and associated with him were three of the most powerful jinxmen of Pangborn: Isak Comandore, Adam McAdam, and the remarkable Enterlin, together with their separate troupes of cabalmen, spellbinders, and apprentices. Altogether, an impressive assemblage. Certainly there were obstacles to be overcome: Ballant Keep was strong; Lord Ballant would fight obstinately; Anderson Grimes, the Ballant Head Jinxman, was efficient and highly respected. There was also this nuisance of the First Folk and the new planting which closed the gap between North and South Wildwood. The First Folk were a pale and feeble race, no match for human beings in single combat, but they guarded their forests with traps and deadfalls. Lord Faide cursed softly under his breath. To circle either North or South Wildwood meant a delay of three days, which could not be tolerated.

Lord Faide returned to the camp. Fires were alight, pots bubbled, orderly rows of sleep holes had been dug into the moss. The knights groomed their horses within the corral of wagons; Lord Faide's own tent had been erected on a hummock, beside the ancient car.

Lord Faide made a quick round of inspection, noting every detail, speaking no word. The jinxmen were encamped a little distance apart from the troops. The apprentices and

lesser spellbinders prepared food, while the jinxmen and cabalmen worked inside their tents, arranging cabinets and cases, correcting whatever disorder had been caused by the jolting of the wagons.

Lord Faide entered the tent of his Head Jinxman. Hein Huss was an enormous man, with arms and legs heavy as tree trunks, a torso like a barrel. His face was pink and placid, his eyes were water-clear; a stiff gray brush rose from his head, which was innocent of the cap jinxmen customarily wore against the loss of hair. Hein Huss disdained such precautions; it was his habit, showing his teeth in a face-splitting grin, to rumble, 'Why should any hoodoo me, old Hein Huss? I am so inoffensive. Whoever tried would surely die, of shame and remorse.'

Lord Faide found Huss busy at his cabinet. The doors stood wide, revealing hundreds of manikins, each tied with a lock of hair, a bit of cloth, a fingernail clipping, daubed with grease, sputum, excrement, blood. Lord Faide knew well that one of these manikins represented himself. He also knew that should he request it Hein Huss would deliver it without hesitation. Part of Huss's *mana* derived from his enormous confidence, the effortless ease of his power. He glanced at Lord Faide and read the question in his mind. 'Lord Ballant did not know of the new planting. Anderson Grimes has now informed him, and Lord Ballant expects that you will be delayed. Grimes has communicated with Gisborne Keep and Castle Cloud. Three hundred men march tonight to reinforce Ballant Keep. They will arrive in two days. Lord Ballant is much elated.'

Lord Faide paced back and forth across the tent. 'Can we cross this planting?'

Hein Huss made a heavy sound of disapproval. 'There are many futures. In certain of these futures you pass. In others you do not pass. I cannot ordain these futures.'

Lord Faide had long learned to control his impatience at what sometimes seemed to be pedantic obfuscation. He grumbled, 'They are either very stupid or very bold planting across the downs in this fashion. I cannot imagine what they intend.'

Hein Huss considered, then grudgingly volunteered an

idea. 'What if they plant west from North Wildwood to Sarrow Copse? What if they plant west from South Wildwood to Old Forest?'

'Then Faide Keep is almost ringed by forest.'

'And what if they join Sarrow Copse to Old Forest?'

Lord Faide stood stock-still, his eyes narrow and thoughtful. 'Faide Keep would be surrounded by forest. We would be imprisoned. .. These plantings, do they proceed?'

'They proceed, so I have been told.'

'What do they hope to gain?'

'I do not know. Perhaps they hope to isolate the keeps, to rid the planet of men. Perhaps they merely want secure avenues between the forests.'

Lord Faide considered. Huss's final suggestion was reasonable enough. During the first centuries of human settlement, sportive young men had hunted the First Folk with clubs and lances, eventually had driven them from their native downs into the forests. 'Evidently they are more clever than we realize. Adam McAdam asserts that they do not think, but it seems that he is mistaken.'

Hein Huss shrugged. 'Adam McAdam equates thought to the human cerebral process. He cannot telepathize with the First Folk, hence he deduces that they do not "think." But I have watched them at Forest Market, and they trade intelligently enough.' He raised his head, appeared to listen, then reached into his cabinet and delicately tightened a noose around the neck of one of the manikins. From outside the tent came a sudden cough and a whooping gasp for air. Huss grinned, twitching open the noose. 'That is Isak Comandore's apprentice. He hopes to complete a Hein Huss manikin. I must say he works diligently, going so far as to touch its feet into my footprints whenever possible.'

Lord Faide went to the flap of the tent. 'We break camp early. Be alert, I may require your help.' He departed the tent.

Hein Huss continued the ordering of his cabinet. Presently he sensed the approach of his rival, Jinxman Isak Comandore, who coveted the office of Head Jinxman with all-

consuming passion. Huss closed the cabinet and hoisted himself to his feet.

Comandore entered the tent, a man tall, crooked, and spindly. His wedge-shaped head was covered with coarse russet ringlets; hot red-brown eyes peered from under his red eyebrows. 'I offer my complete rights to Keyril, and will include the masks, the headdress, the amulets. Of all the demons ever contrived he has won the widest public acceptance. To utter the name Keyril is to complete half the work of a possession. Keyril is a valuable property. I can give no more.'

But Huss shook his head. Comandore's desire was the full simulacrum of Tharon Faide, Lord Faide's oldest son, complete with clothes, hair, skin, eyelashes, tears, excrement, sweat and sputum – the only one in existence, for Lord Faide guarded his son much more jealously than he did himself. 'You offer convincingly,' said Huss, 'but my own demons suffice. The name Dant conveys fully as much terror as Keyril.'

'I will add five hairs from the head of Jinxman Clarence Sears; they are the last, for he is now stark bald.'

'Let us drop the matter; I will keep the simulacrum.'

'As you please,' said Comandore with asperity. He glanced out the flap of the tent. 'That blundering apprentice. He puts the feet of the manikin backwards into your prints.'

Huss opened his cabinet, thumped a manikin with his finger. From outside the tent came a grunt of surprise. Huss grinned. 'He is young and earnest, and perhaps he is clever, who knows?' He went to the flap of the tent, called outside. 'Hey, Sam Salazar, what do you do? Come inside.'

Apprentice Sam Salazar came blinking into the tent, a thick-set youth with a round florid face, overhung with a rather untidy mass of straw-colored hair. In one hand he carried a crude pot-bellied manikin, evidently intended to represent Hein Huss.

'You puzzle both your master and myself,' said Huss. 'There must be method in your folly, but we fail to perceive it. For instance, this moment you place my simulacrum backwards into my track. I feel a tug on my foot, and you pay for your clumsiness.'

Sam Salazar showed small evidence of abashment. 'Jinxman Comandore has warned that we must expect to suffer for our ambitions.'

'If your ambition is jinxmanship,' Comandore declared sharply, 'you had best mend your ways.'

'The lad is craftier than you know,' said Hein Huss. 'Look now.' He took the manikin from the youth, spit into its mouth, plucked a hair from his head, thrust it into a convenient crevice. 'He has a Hein Huss manikin, achieved at very small cost. Now, Apprentice Salazar, how will you hoodoo me?'

'Naturally, I would never dare. I merely want to fill the bare spaces in my cabinet.'

Hein Huss nodded his approval. 'As good a reason as any. Of course you own a simulacrum of Isak Comandore?'

Sam Salazar glanced uneasily at Isak Comandore. 'He leaves none of his traces. If there is so much as an open bottle in the room, he breathes behind his hand.'

'Ridiculous!' exclaimed Hein Huss. 'Comandore, what do you fear?'

'I am conservative,' said Comandore, dryly. 'You make a fine gesture, but some day an enemy may own that simulacrum; then you will regret your bravado.'

'Bah. My enemies are all dead, save one or two who dare not reveal themselves.' He clapped Sam Salazar a great buffet on the shoulder. 'Tomorrow, Apprentice Salazar, great things are in store for you.'

'What manner of great things?'

'Honor, noble self-sacrifice. Lord Faide must beg permission from the First Folk to pass Wildwood, which galls him. But beg he must. Tomorrow, Sam Salazar, I will elect you to lead the way to the parley, to deflect deadfalls, scythes, and nettletraps from the more important person who follows.'

Sam Salazar shook his head and drew back. 'There must be others more worthy; I prefer to ride in the rear with the wagons.'

Comandore waved him from the tent. 'You will do as ordered. Leave us; we have had enough apprentice talk.'

Sam Salazar departed. Comandore turned back to Hein Huss. 'In connection with tomorrow's battle, Anderson

Grimes is especially adept with demons. As I recall, he has developed and successfully publicized Pont, who spreads sleep; Everid, a being of wrath; Deigne, a force of fear. We must take care that in countering these effects we do not neutralize each other.'

'True,' rumbled Huss. 'I have long maintained to Lord Faide that a single jinxman – the Head Jinxman in fact – is more effective than a group at cross-purposes. But he is consumed by ambition and does not listen.'

'Perhaps he wants to be sure that should advancing years overtake the Head Jinxman other equally effective jinxmen are at hand.'

'The future has many paths,' agreed Hein Huss. 'Lord Faide is well advised to seek early for my successor, so that I may train him over the years. I plan to access all the subsidiary jinxmen, and select the most promising. Tomorrow I relegate to you the demons of Anderson Grimes.'

Isak Comandore nodded politely. 'You are wise to give over responsibility. When I feel the weight of my years I hope I may act with similar forethought. Good night, Hein Huss. I go to arrange my demon masks. Tomorrow Keyril must walk like a giant.'

'Good night, Isak Comandore.'

Comandore swept from the tent, and Huss settled himself on his stool. Sam Salazar scratched at the flap. 'Well, lad?' growled Huss. 'Why do you loiter?'

Sam Salazar placed the Hein Huss manikin on the table. 'I have no wish to keep this doll.'

'Throw it in a ditch, then.' Hein Huss spoke gruffly. 'You must stop annoying me with stupid tricks. You efficiently obtrude yourself upon my attention, but you cannot transfer from Comandore's troupe without his express consent.'

'If I gain his consent?'

'You will incur his enmity; he will open his cabinet against you. Unlike myself, you are vulnerable to a hoodoo. I advise you to be content. Isak Comandore is highly skilled and can teach you much.'

Sam Salazar still hesitated. 'Jinxman Comandore, though skilled, is intolerant of new thoughts.'

Hein Huss shifted ponderously on his stool, examined Sam Salazar with his water-clear eyes. 'What new thoughts are these? Your own?'

'The thoughts are new to me, and for all I know new to Isak Comandore. But he will say neither yes nor no.'

Hein Huss sighed, settled his monumental bulk more comfortably. 'Speak then, describe these thoughts, and I will assess their novelty.'

'First, I have wondered about trees. They are sensitive to light, to moisture, to wind, to pressure. Sensitivity implies sensation. Might a man feel into the soul of a tree for these sensations? If a tree were capable of awareness, this faculty might prove useful. A man might select trees as sentinels in strategic sites, and enter into them as he chose.'

Hein Huss was skeptical. 'An amusing notion, but practically not feasible. The reading of minds, the act of possession, televoyance, all similar interplay, require psychic congruence as a basic condition. The minds must be able to become identities at some particular stratum. Unless there is sympathy, there is no linkage. A tree is at opposite poles from a man; the images of tree and man are incommensurable. Hence, anything more than the most trifling flicker of comprehension must be a true miracle of jinxmanship.'

Sam Salazar nodded mournfully. 'I realized this, and at one time hoped to equip myself with the necessary identification.'

'To do this you must become a vegetable. Certainly the tree will never become a man.'

'So I reasoned,' said Sam Salazar. 'I went alone into a grove of trees, where I chose a tall conifer. I buried my feet in the mold, I stood silent and naked – in the sunlight, in the rain; at dawn, noon, dusk, midnight. I closed my mind to manthoughts, I closed my eyes to vision, my ears to sound. I took no nourishment except from rain and sun. I sent roots forth from my feet and branches from my torso. Thirty hours I stood, and two days later another thirty hours, and after two days another thirty hours. I made myself a tree, as nearly as possible to one of flesh and blood.'

Hein Huss gave a great inward gurgle that signalized his amusement. 'And you achieved sympathy?'

'Nothing useful,' Sam Salazar admitted. 'I felt something of the tree's sensations – the activity of light, the peace of dark, the coolness of rain. But visual and auditory experience – nothing. However, I do not regret the trial. It was a useful discipline.'

'An interesting effort, even if inconclusive. The idea is by no means of startling originality, but the empiricism – to use an archaic word – of your method is bold, and no doubt antagonized Isak Comandore, who has no patience with the superstitions of our ancestors. I suspect that he harangued you against frivolity, metaphysics, and inspirationalism.'

'True,' said Sam Salazar. 'He spoke at length.'

'You should take the lesson to heart. Isak Comandore is sometimes unable to make the most obvious truth seem credible. However, I cite you the example of Lord Faide who considers himself an enlightened man, free from superstition. Still, he rides in his feeble car, he carries a pistol sixteen hundred years old, he relies on Hellmouth to protect Faide Keep.'

'Perhaps – unconsciously – he longs for the old magical times,' suggested Sam Salazar thoughtfully.

'Perhaps,' agreed Hein Huss. 'And you do likewise?'

Sam Salazar hesitated. 'There is an aura of romance, a kind of wild grandeur to the old days – but of course,' he added quickly, 'mysticism is no substitute for orthodox logic.'

'Naturally not,' agreed Hein Huss. 'Now go; I must consider the events of tomorrow.'

Sam Salazar departed, and Hein Huss, rumbling and groaning, hoisted himself to his feet. He went to the flap of his tent, surveyed the camp. All now was quiet. The fires were embers, the warriors lay in the pits they had cut into the moss. To the north and south spread the woodlands. Among the trees and out on the downs were faint flickering luminosities, where the First Folk gathered spore-pods from the moss.

Hein Huss became aware of a nearby personality. He turned his head and saw approaching the shrouded form of Jinxman Enterlin, who concealed his face, who spoke only in whispers, who disguised his natural gait with a stiff stilt-

like motion. By this means he hoped to reduce his vulnerability to hostile jinxmanship. The admission carelessly let fall of failing eyesight, of stiff joints, forgetfulness, melancholy, nausea might be of critical significance in controversy by hoodoo. Jinxmen therefore maintained the pose of absolute health and virility, even though they must grope blindly or limp doubled up from cramps.

Hein Huss called out to Enterlin, lifted back the flap to the tent. Enterlin entered; Huss went to the cabinet, brought forth a flask, poured liquor into a pair of stone cups. 'A cordial only, free of overt significance.'

'Good,' whispered Enterlin, selecting the cup farthest from him. 'After all, we jinxmen must relax into the guise of men from time to time.' Turning his back on Huss, he introduced the cup through the folds of his hood, drank. 'Refreshing,' he whispered. 'We need refreshment; tomorrow we must work.'

Huss issued his reverberating chuckle. 'Tomorrow Isak Comandore matches demons with Anderson Grimes. We others perform only subsidiary duties.'

Enterlin seemed to make a quizzical inspection of Hein Huss through the black gauze before his eyes. 'Comandore will relish this opportunity. His vehemence oppresses me, and his is a power which feeds on success. He is a man of fire, you are a man of ice.'

'Ice quenches fire.'

'Fire sometimes melts ice.'

Hein Huss shrugged. 'No matter. I grow weary. Time has passed all of us by. Only a moment ago a young apprentice showed me to myself.'

'As a powerful jinxman, as Head Jinxman to the Faides, you have cause for pride.'

Hein Huss drained the stone cup, set it aside. 'No. I see myself at the top of my profession, with nowhere else to go. Only Sam Salazar the apprentice thinks to search for more universal lore; he comes to me for counsel, and I do not know what to tell him.'

'Strange talk, strange talk!' whispered Enterlin. He moved to the flap of the tent. 'I go now,' he whispered. 'I go to walk on the downs. Perhaps I will see the future.'

'There are many futures.'

Enterlin rustled away and was lost in the dark. Hein Huss groaned and grumbled, then took himself to his couch, where he instantly fell asleep.

II

The night passed. The sun, flickering with films of pink and green, lifted over the horizon. The new planting of the First Folk was silhouetted, a sparse stubble of saplings, against the green and lavender sky. The troops broke camp with practiced efficiency. Lord Faide marched to his car, leaped within; the machine sagged under his weight. He pushed a button, the car drifted forward, heavy as a waterlogged timber.

A mile from the new planting he halted, sent a messenger back to the wagons of the jinxmen. Hein Huss walked ponderously forward, followed by Isak Comandore, Adam McAdam, and Enterlin. Lord Faide spoke to Hein Huss. 'Send someone to speak to the First Folk. Inform them we wish to pass, offering them no harm, but that we will react savagely to any hostility.'

'I will go myself,' said Hein Huss. He turned to Comandore, 'Lend me, if you will, your brash young apprentice. I can put him to good use.'

'If he unmasks a nettle trap by blundering into it, his first useful deed will be done,' said Comandore. He signaled to Sam Salazar, who came reluctantly forward. 'Walk in front of Head Jinxman Hein Huss that he may encounter no traps or scythes. Take a staff to probe the moss.'

Without enthusiasm Sam Salazar borrowed a lance from one of the foot soldiers. He and Huss set forth, along the low rise that previously had separated North from South Wildwood. Occasionally outcroppings of stone penetrated the cover of moss; here and there grew bayberry trees, clumps of tarplant, ginger-tea, and rosewort.

A half mile from the planting Huss halted. 'Now take care, for here the traps will begin. Walk clear of hummocks, these often conceal swing-scythes; avoid moss which shows

a pale blue; it is dying or sickly and may cover a deadfall or a nettle trap.'

'Why cannot you locate the traps by clairvoyance?' asked Sam Salazar in a rather sullen voice. 'It appears an excellent occasion for the use of these faculties.'

'The question is natural,' said Hein Huss with composure. 'However you must know that when a jinxman's own profit or security is at stake his emotions play tricks on him. I would see traps everywhere and would never know whether clairvoyance or fear prompted me. In this case, that lance is a more reliable instrument than my mind.'

Sam Salazar made a salute of understanding and set forth, with Hein Huss stumping behind him. At first he prodded with care, uncovering two traps, then advanced more jauntily; so swiftly indeed that Huss called out in exasperation, 'Caution, unless you court death!'

Sam Salazar obligingly slowed his pace. 'There are traps all around us, but I detect the pattern, or so I believe.'

'Ah, ha, you do? Reveal it to me, if you will. I am only Head Jinxman, and ignorant.'

'Notice. If we walk where the spore-pods have recently been harvested, then we are secure.'

Hein Huss grunted. 'Forward then. Why do you dally? We must do battle at Ballant Keep today.'

Two hundred yards farther, Sam Salazar stopped short. 'Go on, boy, go on!' grumbled Hein Huss.

'The savages threaten us. You can see them just inside the planting. They hold tubes which they point toward us.'

Hein Huss peered, then raised his head and called out in the sibilant language of the First Folk.

A moment or two passed, then one of the creatures came forth, a naked humanoid figure, ugly as a demonmask. Foam-sacs bulged under its arms, orange-lipped foam-vents pointed forward. Its back was wrinkled and loose, the skin serving as a bellows to blow air through the foam-sacs. The fingers of the enormous hands ended in chisel-shaped blades, the head was sheathed in chitin. Billion-faceted eyes swelled from either side of the head, glowing like black opals, merging without definite limit into the chitin. This

was a representative of the original inhabitants of the planet, who until the coming of man had inhabited the downs, burrowing in the moss, protecting themselves behind masses of foam exuded from the underarm sacs.

The creature wandered close, halted. 'I speak for Lord Faide of Faide Keep,' said Huss. 'Your planting bars his way. He wishes that you guide him through, so that his men do not damage the trees, or spring the traps you have set against your enemies.'

'Men are our enemies,' responded the autochthon. 'You may spring as many traps as you care to; that is their purpose.' It backed away.

'One moment,' said Hein Huss sternly. 'Lord Faide must pass. He goes to battle Lord Ballant. He does not wish to battle the First Folk. Therefore it is wise to guide him across the planting without hindrance.'

The creature considered a second or two. 'I will guide him.' He stalked across the moss toward the war party.

Behind followed Hein Huss and Sam Salazar. The autochthon, legs articulated more flexibly than a man's, seemed to weave and wander, occasionally pausing to study the ground ahead.

'I am puzzled,' Sam Salazar told Hein Huss. 'I cannot understand the creature's actions.'

'Small wonder,' grunted Hein Huss. 'He is one of the First Folk, you are human. There is no basis for understanding.'

'I disagree,' said Sam Salazar seriously.

'Eh?' Hein Huss inspected the apprentice with vast disapproval. 'You engage in contention with me, Head Jinxman Hein Huss?'

'Only in a limited sense,' said Sam Salazar. 'I see a basis for understanding with the First Folk in our common ambition to survive.'

'A truism,' grumbled Hein Huss. 'Granting this community of interests with the First Folk, what is your perplexity?'

'The fact that it first refused, then agreed to conduct us across the planting.'

Hein Huss nodded. 'Evidently the information which in-

tervened, that we go to fight at Ballant Keep, occasioned the change.'

'This is clear,' said Sam Salazar. 'But think—'

'You exhort me to think?' roared Hein Huss.

'—here is one of the First Folk, apparently without distinction, who makes an important decision instantly. Is he one of their leaders? Do they live in anarchy?'

'It is easy to put questions,' Hein Huss said gruffly. 'It is not easy to answer them.'

'In short—'

'In short, I do not know. In any event, they are pleased to see us killing one another.'

III

The passage through the planting was made without incident. A mile to the east the autochthon stepped aside and without formality returned to the forest. The war party, which had been marching in single file, regrouped into its usual formation. Lord Faide called Hein Huss and made the unusual gesture of inviting him up into the seat beside him. The ancient car dipped and sagged; the power-mechanism whined and chattered. Lord Faide, in high good spirits, ignored the noise. 'I feared that we might be forced into a time-consuming wrangle. What of Lord Ballant? Can you read his thoughts?'

Hein Huss cast his mind forth. 'Not clearly. He knows of our passage. He is disturbed.'

Lord Faide laughed sardonically. 'For excellent reason! Listen now, I will explain the plan of battle so that all may coordinate their efforts.'

'Very well.'

'We approach in a wide line. Ballant's great weapon is of course Volcano. A decoy must wear my armor and ride in the lead. The yellow-haired apprentice is perhaps the most expendable member of the party. In this way we will learn the potentialities of Volcano. Like our own Hellmouth, it was built to repel vessels from space and cannot command the ground immediately under the keep. Therefore we will

advance in dispersed formation, to regroup two hundred yards from the keep. At this point the jinxmen will impel Lord Ballant forth from the keep. You no doubt have made plans to this end.'

Hein Huss gruffly admitted that such was the case. Like other jinxmen, he enjoyed the pose that his power sufficed for extemporaneous control of any situation.

Lord Faide was in no mood for niceties and pressed for further information. Grudging each word, Hein Huss disclosed his arrangements. 'I have prepared certain influences to discomfit the Ballant defenders and drive them forth. Jinxman Enterlin will sit at his cabinet, ready to retaliate if Lord Ballant orders a spell against you. Anderson Grimes undoubtedly will cast a demon – probably Everid – into the Ballant warriors; in return, Jinxman Comandore will possess an equal or a greater number of Faide warriors with the demon Keyril, who is even more ghastly and horrifying.'

'Good. What more?'

'There is need for no more, if your men fight well.'

'Can you see the future? How does today end?'

'There are many futures. Certain jinxmen – Enterlin for instance – profess to see the thread which leads through the maze; they are seldom correct.'

'Call Enterlin here.'

Hein Huss rumbled his disapproval. 'Unwise, if you desire victory over Ballant Keep.'

Lord Faide inspected the massive jinxman from under his black saturnine brows. 'Why do you say this?'

'If Enterlin foretells defeat, you will be dispirited and fight poorly. If he predicts victory, you become overconfident and likewise fight poorly.'

Lord Faide made a petulant gesture. 'The jinxmen are loud in their boasts until the test is made. Then they always find reasons to retract, to qualify.'

'Ha, ha!' barked Hein Huss. 'You expect miracles, not honest jinxmanship. I spit—' he spat. 'I predict that the spittle will strike the moss. The probabilities are high. But an insect might fly in the way. One of the First Folk might raise through the moss. The chances are slight. In the next instant there is only one future. A minute hence there are

four futures. Five minutes hence, twenty futures. A billion futures could not express all the possibilities of tomorrow. Of these billion, certain are more probable than others. It is true that these probable futures sometimes send a delicate influence into the jinxman's brain. But unless he is completely impersonal and disinterested, his own desires overwhelm this influence. Enterlin is a strange man. He hides himself, he has no appetites. Occasionally his auguries are exact. Nevertheless, I advise against consulting him. You do better to rely on the practical and real uses of jinxmanship.'

Lord Faide said nothing. The column had been marching along the bottom of a low swale; the car had been sliding easily downslope. Now they came to a rise, and the power-mechanism complained so vigorously that Lord Faide was compelled to stop the car. He considered. 'Once over the crest we will be in view of Ballant Keep. Now we must disperse. Send the least valuable man in your troupe forward – the apprentice who tested out the moss. He must wear my helmet and corselet and ride in the car.'

Hein Huss alighted, returned to the wagons, and presently Sam Salazar came forward. Lord Faide eyed the round, florid face with distaste. 'Come close,' he said crisply. Sam Salazar obeyed. 'You will now ride in my place,' said Lord Faide. 'Notice carefully. This rod impels a forward motion. This arm steers – to right, to left. To stop, return the rod to its first position.'

Sam Salazar pointed to some of the other arms, toggles, switches, and buttons. 'What of these?'

'They are never used.'

'And these dials, what is their meaning?'

Lord Faide curled his lip, on the brink of one of his quick furies. 'Since their use is unimportant to me, it is twenty times unimportant to you. Now. Put this cap on your head, and this helmet. See to it that you do not sweat.'

Sam Salazar gingerly settled the magnificent black and green crest of Faide on his head, with a cloth cap underneath.

'Now this corselet.'

The corselet was constructed of green and black metal

sequins, with a pair of scarlet dragon-heads at either side of the breast.

'Now the cloak.' Lord Faide flung the black cloak over Sam Salazar's shoulders. 'Do not venture too close to Ballant Keep. Your purpose is to attract the fire of Volcano. Maintain a lateral motion around the keep, outside of dart range. If you are killed by a dart, the whole purpose of the deception is thwarted.'

'You prefer me to be killed by Volcano?' inquired Sam Salazar.

'No. I wish to preserve the car and the crest. These are relics of great value. Evade destruction by all means possible. The ruse probably will deceive no one; but if it does, and if it draws the fire of Volcano, I must sacrifice the Faide car. Now – sit in my place.'

Sam Salazar climbed into the car, settled himself on the seat.

'Sit straight,' roared Lord Faide. 'Hold your head up! You are simulating Lord Faide! You must not appear to slink!'

Sam Salazar heaved himself erect in the seat. 'To simulate Lord Faide most effectively, I should walk among the warriors, with someone else riding in the car.'

Lord Faide glared, then grinned sourly. 'No matter. Do as I have commanded.'

IV

Sixteen hundred years before, with war raging through space, a group of space captains, their home bases destroyed, had taken refuge on Pangborn. To protect themselves against vengeful enemies, they built great forts armed with weapons from the dismantled spaceships.

The wars receded, Pangborn was forgotten. The newcomers drove the First Folk into the forests, planted and harvested the river valleys. Ballant Keep, like Faide Keep, Castle Cloud, Boghoten, and the rest, overlooked one of these valleys. Four squat towers of a dense black substance supported an enormous parasol roof, and were joined by

walls two-thirds as high as the towers. At the peak of the roof a cupola housed Volcano, the weapon corresponding to Faide's Hellmouth.

The Faide war party advancing over the rise found the great gates already secure, the parapets between the towers thronged with bowmen. According to Lord Faide's strategy, the war party advanced on a broad front. At the center rode Sam Salazar, resplendent in Lord Faide's armor. He made, however, small effort to simulate Lord Faide. Rather than sitting proudly erect, he crouched at the side of the seat, the crest canted at an angle. Lord Faide watched with disgust. Apprentice Salazar's reluctance to be demolished was understandable; if his impersonation failed to convince Lord Ballant, at least the Faide ancestral car might be spared. For a certainty Volcano was being manned; the Ballant weapon-tender could be seen in the cupola, and the snout protruded at a menacing angle.

Apparently the tactic of dispersal, offering no single tempting target, was effective. The Faide war party advanced quickly to a point two hundred yards from the keep, below Volcano's effective field, without drawing fire; first the knights, then the foot-soldiers, then the rumbling wagons of the magicians. The slow-moving Faide car was far outdistanced; any doubt as to the nature of the ruse must now be extinguished.

Apprentice Salazar, disliking the isolation, and hoping to increase the speed of the car, twisted one of the other switches, then another. From under the floor came a thin screeching sound; the car quivered and began to rise. Sam Salazar peered over the side, threw out a leg to jump. Lord Faide ran forward, gesturing and shouting. Sam Salazar hastily drew back his leg, returned the switches to their previous condition. The car dropped like a rock. He snapped the switches up again, cushioning the fall.

'Get out of that car!' roared Lord Faide. He snatched away the helmet, dealt Sam Salazar a buffet which toppled him head over heels. 'Out of the armor; back to your duties!'

Sam Salazar hurried to the jinxmen's wagons where he helped erect Isak Comandore's black tent. Inside the tent a black carpet with red and yellow patterns was laid;

Comandore's cabinet, his chair, and his chest were carried in, and incense set burning in a censer. Directly in front of the main gate Hein Huss superintended the assembly of a rolling stage, forty feet tall and sixty feet long, the surface concealed from Ballant Keep by a tarpaulin.

Meanwhile, Lord Faide had dispatched an emissary, enjoining Lord Ballant to surrender. Lord Ballant delayed his response, hoping to delay the attack as long as possible. If he could maintain himself a day and a half, reinforcements from Gisborne Keep and Castle Cloud might force Lord Faide to retreat.

Lord Faide waited only until the jinxmen had completed their preparations, then sent another messenger, offering two more minutes in which to surrender.

One minute passed, two minutes. The envoys turned on their heels, marched back to the camp.

Lord Faide spoke to Hein Huss. 'You are prepared?'

'I am prepared,' rumbled Hein Huss.

'Drive them forth.'

Huss raised his arm; the tarpaulin dropped from the face of his great display, to reveal a painted representation of Ballant Keep.

Huss retired to his tent, and pulled the flaps together. Braziers burnt fiercely, illuminating the faces of Adam McAdam, eight cabalmen, and six of the most advanced spellbinders. Each worked at a bench supporting several dozen dolls and a small glowing brazier. The cabalmen and spellbinders worked with dolls representing Ballant men-at-arms; Huss and Adam McAdam employed simulacra of the Ballant knights. Lord Ballant would not be hoodooed unless he ordered a jinx against Lord Faide – a courtesy the keep-lords extended each other.

Huss called out: 'Sebastian!'

Sebastian, one of Huss's spellbinders, waiting at the flap to the tent, replied, 'Ready, sir.'

'Begin the display.'

Sebastian ran to the stage, struck fire to a fuse. Watchers inside Ballant Keep saw the depicted keep take fire. Flame erupted from the windows, the roof glowed and crumbled. Inside the tent the two jinxmen, the cabalmen, and the spell-

binders methodically took dolls, dipped them into the heat of the braziers, concentrating, reaching out for the mind of the man whose doll they burnt. Within the keep men became uneasy. Many began to imagine burning sensations, which became more severe as their minds grew more sensitive to the idea of fire. Lord Ballant noted the uneasiness. He signaled to his chief jinxman Anderson Grimes. 'Begin the counterspell.'

Down the front of the keep unrolled a display even larger than Hein Huss's, depicting a hideous beast. It stood on four legs and was shown picking up two men in a pair of hands, biting off their heads. Grimes's cabalmen meanwhile took up dolls representing the Faide warriors, inserted them into models of the depicted beast, and closed the hinged jaws, all the while projecting ideas of fear and disgust. And the Faide warriors, staring at the depicted monster, felt a sense of horror and weakness.

Inside Huss's tent the braziers reeked and dolls smoked. Eyes stared, brows glistened. From time to time one of the workers gasped – signaling the entry of his projection into an enemy mind. Within the keep warriors began to mutter, to slap at burning skin, to eye each other fearfully, noting each other's symptoms. Finally one cried out, and tore at his armor. 'I burn! The cursed witches burn me!' His pain aggravated the discomfort of the others; there was a growing sound throughout the keep.

Lord Ballant's oldest son, his mind penetrated by Hein Huss himself, struck his shield with his mailed fist. 'They burn me! They burn us all! Better to fight than burn!'

'Fight! Fight!' came the voices of the tormented men.

Lord Ballant looked around at the twisted faces, some displaying blisters, scaldmarks. 'Our own spell terrifies them; wait yet a moment!' he pleaded.

His brother called hoarsely, 'It is not your belly that Hein Huss toasts in the flames, it is mine! We cannot win a battle of hoodoos; we must win a battle of arms!'

Lord Ballant cried desperately, 'Wait, our own effects are working! They will flee in terror; wait, wait!'

His cousin tore off his corselet. 'It's Hein Huss! I feel him! My leg's in the fire, the devil laughs at me. Next my

head, he says. Fight, or I go forth to fight alone!'

'Very well,' said Lord Ballant in a fateful voice. 'We go forth to fight. First – the beast goes forth. Then we follow and smite them in their terror.'

The gates to the keep swung suddenly wide. Out sprang what appeared to be the depicted monster: legs moving, arms waving, eyes rolling, issuing evil sounds. Normally the Faide warriors would have seen the monster for what it was: a model carried on the backs of three horses. But their minds had been influenced; they had been infected with horror; they drew back with arms hanging flaccid. From behind the monster the Ballant knights galloped, followed by the Ballant foot soldiers. The charge gathered momentum, tore into the Faide center. Lord Faide bellowed orders; discipline asserted itself. The Faide knights disengaged, divided into three platoons, and engulfed the Ballant charge, while the foot soldiers poured darts into the advancing ranks.

There was the clatter and surge of battle; Lord Ballant, seeing that his sally had failed to overwhelm the Faide forces, and thinking to conserve his own forces, ordered a retreat. In good order the Ballant warriors began to back up toward the keep. The Faide knights held close contact, hoping to win to the courtyard. Close behind came a heavily loaded wagon pushed by armored horses, to be wedged against the gate.

Lord Faide called an order; a reserve platoon of ten knights charged from the side, thrust behind the main body of Ballant horsemen, rode through the footsoldiers, fought into the keep, cut down the gate-tenders.

Lord Ballant bellowed to Anderson Grimes, 'They have won inside; quick with your cursed demon! If he can help us, let him do so now!'

'Demon-possession is not a matter of an instant,' muttered the jinxman. 'I need time.'

'You have no time! Ten minutes and we're all dead!'

'I will do my best. Everid, Everid, come swift!'

He hastened into his workroom, donned his demonmask, tossed handful after handful of incense into the brazier.

Against one wall stood a great form: black, slit-eyed, noseless. Great white fangs hung from its upper palate; it stood on heavy bent legs, arms reached forward to grasp. Anderson Grimes swallowed a cup of syrup, paced slowly back and forth. A moment passed.

'Grimes!' came Ballant's call from outside. 'Grimes!'

A voice spoke. 'Enter without fear.'

Lord Ballant, carrying his ancestral side arm, entered. He drew back with an involuntary sound. 'Grimes!' he whispered.

'Grimes is not here,' said the voice. 'I am here. Enter.'

Lord Ballant came forward stiff-legged. The room was dark except for the feeble glimmer of the brazier. Anderson Grimes crouched in a corner, head bowed under his demon-mask. The shadows twisted and pulsed with shapes and faces, forms struggling to become solid. The black image seemed to vibrate with life.

'Bring in your warriors,' said the voice. 'Bring them in five at a time, bid them look only at the floor until commanded to raise their eyes.'

Lord Ballant retreated; there was no sound in the room.

A moment passed; then five limp and exhausted warriors filed into the room, eyes low.

'Look slowly up,' said the voice. 'Look at the orange fire. Breathe deeply. Then look at me. I am Everid, Demon of Hate. Look at me. Who am I?'

'You are Everid, Demon of Hate,' quavered the warriors.

'I stand all around you, in a dozen forms. . . I come closer. Where am I?'

'You are close.'

'Now I am you. We are together.'

There was a sudden quiver of motion. The warriors stood straighter, their faces distorted.

'Go forth,' said the voice. 'Go quietly into the court. In a few minutes we march forth to slay.'

The five stalked forth. Five more entered.

Outside the wall the Ballant knights had retreated as far as the gate; within, seven Faide knights still survived, and with their backs to the wall held the Ballant warriors away from the gate mechanism.

In the Faide camp Huss called to Comandore, 'Everid is walking. Bring forth Keyril.'

'Send the men,' came Comandore's voice, low and harsh. 'Send the men to me. I am Keyril.'

Within the keep twenty warriors came marching into the courtyard. Their steps were cautious, tentative, slow. Their faces had lost individuality, they were twisted and distorted, curiously alike.

'Bewitched!' whispered the Ballant soldiers, drawing back. The seven Faide knights watched with sudden fright. But the twenty warriors, paying them no heed, marched out the gate. The Ballant knights parted; for an instant there was a lull in the fighting. The twenty sprang like tigers. Their swords glistened, twinkling in water-bright arcs. They crouched, jerked, jumped; Faide arms, legs, heads were hewed off. The twenty were cut and battered, but the blows seemed to have no effect.

The Faide attack faltered, collapsed. The knights, whose armor was no protection against the demoniac swords, retreated. The twenty possessed warriors raced out into the open toward the foot soldiers, running with great strides, slashing and rending. The Faide foot soldiers fought for a moment, then they too gave way and turned to flee.

From behind Comandore's tent appeared thirty Faide warriors, marching stiffly, slowly. Like the Ballant twenty their faces were alike – but between the Everid-possessed and the Keyril-possessed was the difference between the face of Everid and the face of Keyril.

Keyril and Everid fought, using the men as weapons, without fear, retreat, or mercy. Hack, chop, cut. Arms, legs, sundered torsos. Bodies fought headless for moments before collapsing. Only when a body was minced, hacked to bits, did the demoniac vitality depart. Presently there were no more men of Everid, and only fifteen men of Keyril. These hopped and limped and tumbled toward the keep where Faide knights still held the gate. The Ballant knights met them in despair, knowing that now was the decisive moment. Leaping, leering from chopped faces, slashing from tireless arms, the warriors cut a hole into the iron. The Faide knights, roaring victory cries, plunged after. Into the court-

yard surged the battle, and now there was no longer doubt of the outcome. Ballant Keep was taken.

Back in his tent Isak Comandore took a deep breath, shuddered, flung down his demonmask. In the courtyard the twelve remaining warriors dropped in their tracks, twitched, gasped, gushed blood and died.

Lord Ballant, in the last gallant act of a gallant life, marched forth brandishing his ancestral side arm. He aimed across the bloody field at Lord Faide, pulled the trigger. The weapon spewed a brief gout of light; Lord Faide's skin prickled and hair rose from his head. The weapon crackled, turned cherry-red, and melted. Lord Ballant threw down the weapon, drew his sword, marched forth to challenge Lord Faide.

Lord Faide, disinclined to unnecessary combat, signaled to his soldiers. A flight of darts ended Lord Ballant's life, saving him the discomfort of formal execution.

There was no further resistance. The Ballant defenders threw down their arms and marched grimly out to kneel before Lord Faide, while inside the keep the Ballant women gave themselves to mourning and grief.

V

Lord Faide had no wish to linger at Ballant Keep, for he took no relish in his victories. Inevitably, a thousand decisions had to be made. Six of the closest Ballant kinsmen were summarily stabbed and the title declared defunct. Others of the clan were offered a choice: an oath of life-long fealty together with a moderate ransom, or death. Only two, eyes blazing hate, chose death and were instantly stabbed.

Lord Faide had now achieved his ambition. For over a thousand years the keep-lords had struggled for power; now one, now another gaining ascendancy. None before had ever extended his authority across the entire continent – which meant control of the planet, since all other land was either sun-parched rock or eternal ice. Ballant Keep had long thwarted Lord Faide's drive to power; now – success, total

and absolute. It still remained to chastise the lords of Castle Cloud and Gisborne, both of whom, seeing opportunity to overwhelm Lord Faide, had ranged themselves behind Lord Ballant. But these were matters that might well be assigned to Hein Huss.

Lord Faide, for the first time in his life, felt a trace of uncertainty. Now what? No real adversaries remained. The First Folk must be whipped back, but here was no great problem; they were numerous, but no more than savages. He knew that dissatisfaction and controversy would ultimately arise among his kinsmen and allies. Inaction and boredom would breed irritability; idle minds would calculate the pros and cons of mischief. Even the most loyal would remember the campaigns with nostalgia and long for the excitement, the release, the license, of warfare. Somehow he must find means to absorb the energy of so many active and keyed-up men. How and where, this was the problem. The construction of roads? New farmland claimed from the downs? Yearly tournaments-at-arms? Lord Faide frowned at the inadequacy of his solutions, but his imagination was impoverished by the lack of tradition. The original settlers of Pangborn had been warriors, and had brought with them a certain amount of practical rule-of-thumb knowledge, but little else. The tales they passed down the generations described the great spaceships which moved with magic speed and certainty, the miraculous weapons, the wars in the void, but told nothing of human history or civilized achievement. And so Lord Faide, full of power and success, but with no goal toward which to turn his strength, felt more morose and saturnine than ever.

He gloomily inspected the spoils from Ballant Keep. They were of no great interest to him. Ballant's ancestral car was no longer used, but displayed behind a glass case. He inspected the weapon Volcano, but this could not be moved. In any event it was useless, its magic lost forever. Lord Faide now knew that Lord Ballant had ordered it turned against the Faide car, but that it had refused to spew its vaunted fire. Lord Faide saw with disdainful amusement that Volcano had been sadly neglected. Corrosion had pitted the metal, careless cleaning had twisted the exterior tubing,

undoubtedly diminishing the potency of the magic. No such neglect at Faide Keep! Jambart the weapon-tender cherished Hellmouth with absolute devotion. Elsewhere were other ancient devices, interesting but useless – the same sort of curios that cluttered shelves and cases at Faide Keep. (Peculiar, these ancient men! thought Lord Faide: at once so clever, yet so primitive and impractical. Conditions had changed; there had been enormous advances since the dark ages sixteen hundred years ago. For instance, the ancients had used intricate fetishes of metal and glass to communicate with each other. Lord Faide need merely voice his needs; Hein Huss could project his mind a hundred miles to see, to hear, to relay Lord Faide's words.) The ancients had contrived dozens of such objects, but the old magic had worn away and they never seemed to function. Lord Ballant's side arm had melted, after merely stinging Lord Faide. Imagine a troop armed thus trying to cope with a platoon of demon-possessed warriors! Slaughter of the innocents!

Among the Ballant trove Lord Faide noted a dozen old books and several reels of microfilm. The books were worthless, page after page of incomprehensible jargon; the microfilm was equally undecipherable. Again Lord Faide wondered skeptically about the ancients. Clever of course, but to look at the hard facts, they were little more advanced than the First Folk: neither had facility with telepathy or voyance or demon-command. And the magic of the ancients: might there not be a great deal of exaggeration in the legends? Volcano, for instance. A joke. Lord Faide wondered about his own Hellmouth. But no – surely Hellmouth was more trustworthy; Jambart cleaned and polished the weapon daily and washed the entire cupola with vintage wine every month. If human care could induce faithfulness, then Hellmouth was ready to defend Faide Keep!

Now there was no longer need for defense. Faide was supreme. Considering the future, Lord Faide made a decision. There should no longer be keep-lords on Pangborn; he would abolish the appellation. Habitancy of the keeps would gradually be transferred to trusted bailiffs on a yearly basis.

The former lords would be moved to comfortable but indefensible manor houses, with the maintenance of private troops forbidden. Naturally they must be allowed jinxmen, but these would be made accountable to himself – perhaps through some sort of licensing provision. He must discuss the matter with Hein Huss. A matter for the future, however. Now he merely wished to settle affairs and return to Faide Keep.

There was little more to be done. The surviving Ballant kinsmen he sent to their homes after Hein Huss had impregnated fresh dolls with their essences. Should they default on their ransoms, a twinge of fire, a few stomach cramps would more than set them right. Ballant Keep itself Lord Faide would have liked to burn – but the material of the ancients was proof to fire. But in order to discourage any new pretenders to the Ballant heritage Lord Faide ordered all the heirlooms and relics brought forth into the courtyard, and then, one at a time, in order of rank, he bade his men choose. Thus the Ballant wealth was distributed. Even the jinxmen were invited to choose, but they despised the ancient trinkets as works of witless superstition. The lesser spellbinders and apprentices rummaged through the leavings, occasionally finding an overlooked bauble or some anomalous implement. Isak Comandore was irritated to find Sam Salazar staggering under a load of the ancient books. 'And what is your purpose with these?' he barked. 'Why do you burden yourself with rubbish?'

Sam Salazar hung his head. 'I have no definite purpose. Undoubtedly there was wisdom – or at least knowledge – among the ancients; perhaps I can use these symbols of knowledge to sharpen my own understanding.'

Comandore threw up his hands in disgust. He turned to Hein Huss who stood nearby. 'First he fancies himself a tree and stands in the mud; now he thinks to learn jinxmanship through a study of ancient symbols.'

Huss shrugged. 'They were men like ourselves, and, though limited, they were not entirely obtuse. A certain simian cleverness is required to fabricate these objects.'

'Simian cleverness is no substitute for sound jinxmanship,' retorted Isak Comandore. 'This is a point hard to over-

emphasize; I have drummed it into Salazar's head a hundred times. And now, look at him.'

Huss grunted noncommittally. 'I fail to understand what he hopes to achieve.'

Sam Salazar tried to explain, fumbling for words to express an idea that did not exist. 'I thought perhaps to decipher the writing, if only to understand what the ancients thought, and perhaps to learn how to perform one or two of their tricks.'

Comandore rolled up his eyes. 'What enemy bewitched me when I consented to take you as apprentice? I can cast twenty hoodoos in an hour, more than any of the ancients could achieve in a lifetime.'

'Nevertheless,' said Sam Salazar, 'I notice that Lord Faide rides in his ancestral car, and that Lord Ballant sought to kill us all with Volcano.'

'I notice,' said Comandore with feral softness, 'that my demon Keyril conquered Lord Ballant's Volcano, and that riding on my wagon I can outdistance Lord Faide in his car.'

Sam Salazar thought better of arguing further. 'True, Jinxman Comandore, very true. I stand corrected.'

'Then discard that rubbish and make yourself useful. We return to Faide Keep in the morning.'

'As you wish, Jinxman Comandore.' Sam Salazar threw the books back into the trash.

VI

The Ballant clan had been dispersed, Ballant Keep was despoiled. Lord Faide and his men banqueted somberly in the great hall, tended by silent Ballant servitors.

Ballant Keep had been built on the same splendid scale as Faide Keep. The great hall was a hundred feet long, fifty feet wide, fifty feet high, paneled in planks sawn from pale native hardwood, rubbed and waxed to a rich honey color. Enormous black beams supported the ceiling; from these hung candelabra, intricate contrivances of green, purple, and blue glass, knotted with ancient but still bright light-motes.

On the far wall hung portraits of all the lords of Ballant Keep – 105 grave faces in a variety of costumes. Below, a genealogical chart ten feet high detailed the descent of the Ballants and their connections with the other noble clans. Now there was a desolate air to the hall, and the 105 dead faces were meaningless and empty.

Lord Faide dined without joy, and cast dour side glances at those of his kinsmen who reveled too gladly. Lord Ballant, he thought, had conducted himself only as he himself might have done under the same circumstances; coarse exultation seemed in poor taste, almost as if it were disrespect for Lord Faide himself. His followers were quick to catch his mood, and the banquet proceeded with greater decorum.

The jinxmen sat apart in a smaller room to the side. Anderson Grimes, erstwhile Ballant Head Jinxman, sat beside Hein Huss, trying to put a good face on his defeat. After all, he had performed creditably against four powerful adversaries, and there was no cause to feel a diminution of *mana*. The five jinxmen discussed the battle, while the cabalmen and spellbinders listened respectfully. The conduct of the demon-possessed troops occasioned the most discussion. Anderson Grimes readily admitted that his conception of Everid was a force absolutely brutal and blunt, terrifying in its indomitable vigor. The other jinxmen agreed that he undoubtedly succeeded in projecting these qualities; Hein Huss however pointed out that Isak Comandore's Keyril, as cruel and vigorous as Everid, also combined a measure of crafty malice, which tended to make the possessed soldier a more effective weapon.

Anderson Grimes allowed that this might well be the case, and that in fact he had been considering such an augmentation of Everid's characteristics.

'To my mind,' said Huss, 'the most effective demon should be swift enough to avoid the strokes of the brute demons, such as Keyril and Everid. I cite my own Dant as example. A Dant-possessed warrior can easily destroy a Keyril or an Everid, simply through his agility. In an encounter of this sort the Keyrils and Everids presently lose their capacity to terrify, and thus half the effect is lost.'

Isak Comandore pierced Huss with a hot russet glance.

'You state a presumption if it were fact. I have formulated Keyril with sufficient craft to counter any such displays of speed. I firmly believe Keyril to be the most fearsome of all demons.'

'It may well be,' rumbled Hein Huss thoughtfully. He beckoned to a steward, gave instructions. The steward reduced the light a trifle. 'Behold,' said Hein Huss. 'There is Dant. He comes to join the banquet.' To the side of the room loomed the tiger-striped Dant, a creature constructed of resilient metal, with four terrible arms, and a squat black head which seemed all gaping jaw.

'Look,' came the husky voice of Isak Comandore. 'There is Keyril.' Keyril was rather more humanoid and armed with a cutlass. Dant spied Keyril. The jaws gaped wider, it sprang to the attack.

The battle was a thing of horror; the two demons rolled, twisted, bit, frothed, uttered soundless shrieks, tore each other apart. Suddenly Dant sprang away, circled Keyril with dizzying speed, faster, faster; became a blur, a wild coruscation of colors that seemed to give off a high-pitched wailing sound, rising higher and higher in pitch. Keyril hacked brutally with his cutlass, then seemed to grow feeble and wan. The light that once had been Dant blazed white, exploded in a mental shriek; Keyril was gone and Isak Comandore lay moaning.

Hein Huss drew a deep breath, wiping his face, looked about him with a complacent grin. The entire company sat rigid as stones, staring, all except the apprentice Sam Salazar, who met Hein Huss's glance with a cheerful smile.

'So,' growled Huss, panting from his exertion, 'you consider yourself superior to the illusion; you sit and smirk at one of Hein Huss's best efforts.'

'No, no,' cried Sam Salazar, 'I mean no disrespect! I want to learn, so I watched you rather than the demons. What could they teach me? Nothing!'

'Ah,' said Huss, mollified. 'And what did you learn?'

'Likewise, nothing,' said Sam Salazar, 'but at least I do not sit like a fish.'

Comandore's voice came soft but crackling with wrath. 'You see in me the resemblance to a fish?'

'I except you, Jinxman Comandore, naturally,' Sam Salazar explained.

'Please go to my cabinet, Apprentice Salazar, and fetch me the doll that is your likeness. The steward will bring a basin of water, and we shall have some sport. With your knowledge of fish you perhaps can breathe under water. If not – you may suffocate.'

'I prefer not, Jinxman Comandore,' said Sam Salazar. 'In fact, with your permission, I now resign your service.'

Comandore motioned to one of his cabalmen. 'Fetch me the Salazar doll. Since he is no longer my apprentice, it is likely indeed that he will suffocate.'

'Come now, Comandore,' said Hein Huss gruffly. 'Do not torment the lad. He is innocent and a trifle addled. Let this be an occasion of placidity and ease.'

'Certainly, Hein Huss,' said Comandore. 'Why not? There is ample time in which to discipline this upstart.'

'Jinxman Huss,' said Sam Salazar, 'since I am now relieved of my duties to Jinxman Comandore, perhaps you will accept me into your service.'

Hein Huss made a noise of vast distaste. 'You are not my responsibility.'

'There are many futures, Hein Huss,' said Sam Salazar. 'You have said as much yourself.'

Hein Huss looked at Sam Salazar with his water-clear eyes. 'Yes, there are many futures. And I think that tonight sees the full amplitude of jinxmanship... I think that never again will such power and skill gather at the same table. We shall die one by one and there shall be none to fill our shoes... Yes, Sam Salazar. I will take you as apprentice. Isak Comandore, do you hear? This youth is now of my company.'

'I must be compensated,' growled Comandore.

'You have coveted my doll of Tharon Faide, the only one in existence. It is yours.'

'Ah, ha!' cried Isak Comandore leaping to his feet. 'Hein Huss, I salute you! You are generous indeed! I thank you and accept!'

Hein Huss motioned to Sam Salazar. 'Move your effects to my wagon. Do not show your face again tonight.'

Sam Salazar bowed with dignity and departed the hall.

The banquet continued, but now something of melancholy filled the room. Presently a messenger from Lord Faide came to warn all to bed, for the party returned to Faide Keep at dawn.

VII

The victorious Faide troops gathered on the heath before Ballant Keep. As a parting gesture Lord Faide ordered the great gate torn off the hinges, so that ingress could never again be denied him. But even after sixteen hundred years the hinges were proof to all the force the horses could muster, and the gates remained in place.

Lord Faide accepted the fact with good grace and bade farewell to his cousin Renfroy, whom he had appointed bailiff. He climbed into his car, settled himself, snapped the switch. The car groaned and moved forward. Behind came the knights and the foot soldiers, then the baggage train, laden with booty, and finally the wagons of the jinxmen.

Three hours the column marched across the mossy downs. Ballant Keep dwindled behind; ahead appeared North and South Wildwood, darkening all the sweep of the western horizon. Where once the break had existed, the First Folk's new planting showed a smudge lower and less intense than the old woodlands.

Two miles from the woodlands Lord Faide called a halt and signaled up his knights. Hein Huss laboriously dismounted from his wagon, came forward.

'In the event of resistance,' Lord Faide told the knights, 'do not be tempted into the forest. Stay with the column and at all times be on your guard against traps.'

Hein Huss spoke. 'You wish me to parley with the First Folk once more?'

'No,' said Lord Faide. 'It is ridiculous that I must ask permission of savages to ride over my own land. We return as we came; if they interfere, so much the worse for them.'

'You are rash,' said Huss with simple candor.

Lord Faide glanced down at him with black eyebrows

raised. 'What damage can they do if we avoid their traps? Blow foam at us?'

'It is not my place to advise or to warn,' said Hein Huss. 'However, I point out that they exhibit a confidence which does not come from conscious weakness; also, that they carried tubes, apparently hollow grasswood shoots, which imply missiles.'

Lord Faide nodded. 'No doubt. However, the knights wear armor, the soldiers carry bucklers. It is not fit that I, Lord Faide of Faide Keep, choose my path to suit the whims of the First Folk. This must be made clear, even if the exercise involves a dozen or so First Folk corpses.'

'Since I am not a fighting man,' remarked Hein Huss, 'I will keep well to the rear, and pass only when the way is secure.'

'As you wish.' Lord Faide pulled down the visor of his helmet. 'Forward.'

The column moved toward the forest, along the previous track, which showed plain across the moss. Lord Faide rode in the lead, flanked by his brother, Gethwin Faide, and his cousin, Mauve Dermont-Faide.

A half mile passed, and another. The forest was only a mile distant. Overhead the great sun rode at zenith; brightness and heat poured down; the air carried the oily scent of thorn and tarbush. The column moved on, more slowly; the only sound the clanking of armor, the muffled thud of hooves in the moss, the squeal of wagon wheels.

Lord Faide rose up in his car, watching for any sign of hostile preparation. A half mile from the planting the forms of the First Folk, waiting in the shade along the forest's verge, became visible. Lord Faide ignored them, held a steady pace along the track they had traveled before.

The half-mile became a quarter-mile. Lord Faide turned to order the troops into single file and was just in time to see a hole suddenly open into the moss and his brother, Gethwin Faide, drop from sight. There was a rattle, a thud, the howling of the impaled horse; Gethwin's wild calls as the horse kicked and crushed him into the stakes. Mauve Dermont-Faide, riding beside Gethwin, could not control his own horse, which leaped aside from the pit and blundered

upon a trigger. Up from the moss burst a tree trunk studded with foot-long thorns. It snapped, quick as a scorpion's tail; the thorns punctured Mauve Dermont-Faide's armor, his chest, and whisked him from his horse to carry him suspended, writhing and screaming. The tip of the scythe pounded into Lord Faide's car, splintered against the hull. The car swung groaning through the air. Lord Faide clutched at the windscreen to prevent himself from falling.

The column halted; several men ran to the pit, but Gethwin Faide lay twenty feet below, crushed under his horse. Others took Mauve Dermont-Faide down from the swaying scythe, but he, too, was dead.

Lord Faide's skin tingled with a gooseflesh of hate and rage. He looked toward the forest. The First Folk stood motionless. He beckoned to Bernard, sergeant of the foot soldiers. 'Two men with lances to try out the ground ahead. All others ready with darts. At my signal spit the devils.'

Two men came forward, and marching before Lord Faide's car, probed at the ground. Lord Faide settled in his seat. 'Forward.'

The column moved slowly toward the forest, every man tense and ready. The lances of the two men in the vanguard presently broke through the moss, to disclose a nettle trap – a pit lined with nettles, each frond ripe with globes of acid. Carefully they probed out a path to the side, and the column filed around, each man walking in the other's tracks.

At Lord Faide's side now rode his two nephews, Scolford and Edwin. 'Notice,' said Lord Faide in a voice harsh and tight. 'These traps were laid since our last passage; an act of malice.'

'But why did they guide us through before?'

Lord Faide smiled bitterly. 'They were willing that we should die at Ballant Keep. But we have disappointed them.'

'Notice, they carry tubes,' said Scolford.

'Blowguns possibly,' suggested Edwin.

Scolford disagreed. 'They cannot blow through their foam-vents.'

'No doubt we shall soon learn,' said Lord Faide. He rose in his seat, called to the rear. 'Ready with the darts!'

The soldiers raised their crossbows. The column advanced slowly, now only a hundred yards from the planting. The white shapes of the First Folk moved uneasily at the forest's edges. Several of them raised their tubes, seemed to sight along the length. They twitched their great hands.

One of the tubes was pointed toward Lord Faide. He saw a small black object leave the opening, flit forward, gathering speed. He heard a hum, waxing to a rasping, clicking flutter. He ducked behind the windscreen; the projectile swooped in pursuit, struck the windscreen like a thrown stone. It fell crippled upon the forward deck of the car – a heavy black insect like a wasp, its broken proboscis oozing ocher liquid, horny wings beating feebly, eyes like dumbbells fixed on Lord Faide. With his mailed fist, he crushed the creature.

Behind him other wasps struck knights and men; Corex Faide-Battaro took the prong through his visor into the eye, but the armor of the other knights defeated the wasps. The foot soldiers, however, lacked protection; the wasps half buried themselves in flesh. The soldiers called out in pain, clawed away the wasps, squeezed the wounds. Corex Faide-Battaro toppled from his horse, ran blindly out over the heath, and after fifty feet fell into a trap. The stricken soldiers began to twitch, then fell on the moss, thrashed, leaped up to run with flapping arms, threw themselves in wild somersaults, forward, backward, foaming and thrashing.

In the forest, the First Folk raised their tubes again. Lord Faide bellowed, 'Spit the creatures! Bowmen, launch your darts!'

There came the twang of crossbows, darts snapped at the quiet white shapes. A few staggered and wandered aimlessly away; most, however, plucked out the darts or ignored them. They took capsules from small sacks, put them to the end of their tubes.

'Beware the wasps!' cried Lord Faide. 'Strike with your bucklers! Kill the cursed things in flight!'

The rasp of horny wings came again; certain of the soldiers found courage enough to follow Lord Faide's orders, and battered down the wasps. Others struck home as before;

behind came another flight. The column became a tangle of struggling, crouching men.

'Footmen, retreat!' called Lord Faide furiously. 'Footmen back! Knights to me!'

The soldiers fled back along the track, taking refuge behind the baggage wagons. Thirty of their number lay dying, or dead, on the moss.

Lord Faide cried out to his knights in a voice like a bugle. 'Dismount, follow slow after me! Turn your helmets, keep the wasps from your eyes! One step at a time, behind the car! Edwin, into the car beside me, test the footing with your lance. Once in the forest there are no traps! Then attack!'

The knights formed themselves into a line behind the car. Lord Faide drove slowly forward, his kinsman Edwin prodding the ground ahead. The First Folk sent out a dozen more wasps, which dashed themselves vainly against the armor. Then there was silence ... cessation of sound, activity. The First Folk watched impassively as the knights approached, step by step.

Edwin's lance found a trap, the column moved to the side. Another trap – and the column was diverted from the planting toward the forest. Step by step, yard by yard – another trap, another detour, and now the column was only a hundred feet from the forest. A trap to the left, a trap to the right: the safe path led directly toward an enormous heavy-branched tree. Seventy feet, fifty feet, then Lord Faide drew his sword.

'Prepare to charge, kill till your arms tire!'

From the forest came a crackling sound. The branches of the great tree trembled and swayed. The knights stared, for a moment frozen into place. The tree toppled forward, the knights madly tried to flee – to the rear, to the sides. Traps opened; the knights dropped upon sharp stakes. The tree fell; boughs cracked armored bodies like nuts; there was the hoarse yelling of pinned men, screams from the traps, the crackling subsidence of breaking branches. Lord Faide had been battered down into the car, and the car had been pressed groaning into the moss. His first instinctive act was to press the switch to rest position; then he staggered erect,

clambered up through the boughs. A pale unhuman face peered at him; he swung his fist, crushed the faceted eye-bulge, and roaring with rage scrambled through the branches. Others of his knights were working themselves free, although almost a third were either crushed or impaled.

The First Folk came scrambling forward, armed with enormous thorns, long as swords. But now Lord Faide could reach them at close quarters. Hissing with vindictive joy he sprang into their midst, swinging his sword with both hands, as if demon-possessed. The surviving knights joined him and the ground became littered with dismembered First Folk. They drew back slowly, without excitement. Lord Faide reluctantly called back his knights. 'We must succor those still pinned, as many are still alive.'

As well as possible branches were cut away, injured knights drawn forth. In some cases the soft moss had cushioned the impact of the tree. Six knights were dead, another four crushed beyond hope of recovery. To these Lord Faide himself gave the *coup de grâce*. Ten minutes further hacking and chopping freed Lord Faide's car, while the First Folk watched incuriously from the forest. The knights wished to charge once more, but Lord Faide ordered retreat. Without interference they returned the way they had come, back to the baggage train.

Lord Faide ordered a muster. Of the original war party, less than two-thirds remained. Lord Faide shook his head bitterly. Galling to think how easily he had been led into a trap! He swung on his heel, strode to the rear of the column, to the wagons of the magicians. The jinxmen sat around a small fire, drinking tea. 'Which of you will hoodoo these white forest vermin? I want them dead – stricken with sickness, cramps, blindness, the most painful afflictions you can contrive!'

There was general silence. The jinxmen sipped their tea.

'Well?' demanded Lord Faide. 'Have you no answer? Do I not make myself plain?'

Hein Huss cleared his throat, spat into the blaze. 'Your

wishes are plain. Unfortunately we cannot hoodoo the First Folk.'

'And why?'

'There are technical reasons.'

Lord Faide knew the futility of argument. 'Must we slink home around the forest? If you cannot hoodoo the First Folk, then bring out your demons! I will march on the forest and chop out a path with my sword!'

'It is not for me to suggest tactics,' grumbled Hein Huss.

'Go on, speak! I will listen.'

'A suggestion has been put to me, which I will pass to you. Neither I nor the other jinxmen associate ourselves with it, since it recommends the crudest of physical principles.'

'I await the suggestion,' said Lord Faide.

'It is merely this. One of my apprentices tampered with your car, as you may remember.'

'Yes, and I will see he gets the hiding he deserves.'

'By some freak he caused the car to rise high into the air. The suggestion is this: that we load the car with as much oil as the baggage train affords, that we send the car aloft and let it drift over the planting. At a suitable moment, the occupant of the car will pour the oil over the trees, then hurl down a torch. The forest will burn. The First Folk will be at least discomfited; at best a large number will be destroyed.'

Lord Faide slapped his hands together. 'Excellent! Quickly, to work!' He called a dozen soldiers, gave them orders; four kegs of cooking oil, three buckets of pitch, six demijohns of spirit were brought and lifted into the car. The engines grated and protested, and the car sagged almost to the moss.

Lord Faide shook his head sadly. 'A rude use of the relic, but all in good purpose. Now, where is that apprentice? He must indicate which switches and which buttons he turned.'

'I suggest,' said Hein Huss, 'that Sam Salazar be sent up with the car.'

Lord Faide looked sidewise at Sam Salazar's round, bland countenance. 'An efficient hand is needed, a seasoned judgment. I wonder if he can be trusted?'

'I would think so,' said Hein Huss, 'inasmuch as it was

Sam Salazar who evolved the scheme in the first place.'

'Very well. In with you, Apprentice! Treat my car with reverence! The wind blows away from us; fire this edge of the forest, in as long a strip as you can manage. The torch, where is the torch?'

The torch was brought and secured to the side of the car.

'One more matter,' said Sam Salazar. 'I would like to borrow the armor of some obliging knight, to protect myself from the wasps. Otherwise—'

'Armor!' bawled Lord Faide. 'Bring armor!'

At last, fully accoutered and with visor down, Sam Salazar climbed into the car. He seated himself, peered intently at the buttons and switches. In truth he was not precisely certain as to which he had manipulated before... He considered, reached forward, pushed, turned. The motors roared and screamed; the car shuddered, sluggishly rose into the air. Higher, higher, twenty feet, forty feet, sixty feet – a hundred, two hundred. The wind eased the car toward the forest; in the shade the First Folk watched. Several of them raised tubes, opened the shutters. The onlookers saw the wasps dart through the air to dash against Sam Salazar's armor.

The car drifted over the trees; Sam Salazar began ladling out the oil. Below, the First Folk stirred uneasily. The wind carried the car too far over the forest; Sam Salazar worked the controls, succeeded in guiding himself back. One keg was empty, and another; he tossed them out, presently emptied the remaining two, and the buckets of pitch. He soaked a rag in spirit, ignited it, threw it over the side, poured the spirit after.

The flaming rag fell into leaves. A crackle, fire blazed and sprang. The car now floated at a height of five hundred feet. Salazar poured over the remaining spirits, dropped the demijohns, guided the car back over the heath, and fumbling nervously with the controls dropped the car in a series of swoops back to the moss.

Lord Faide sprang forward, clapped him on the shoulder. 'Excellently done! The forest blazes like tinder!'

The men of Faide Keep stood back, rejoicing to see the

flames soar and lick. The First Folk scurried back from the heat, waving their arms; foam of a peculiar purple color issued from their vents as they ran, small useless puffs discharged as if by accident or through excitement. The flames ate through the first forest, then spread into the new planting, leaping through the leaves.

'Prepare to march!' called Lord Faide. 'We pass directly behind the flames, before the First Folk return.'

Off in the forest the First Folk perched in the trees, blowing out foam in great puffs and billows, building a wall of insulation. The flames had eaten half across the new planting, leaving behind smoldering saplings.

'Forward! Briskly!'

The column moved ahead. Coughing in the smoke, eyes smarting, they passed under still blazing trees and came out on the western downs.

Slowly the column moved forward, led by a pair of soldiers prodding the moss with lances. Behind followed Lord Faide with the knights, then came the foot soldiers, then the rumbling baggage train, and finally the six wagons of the jinxmen.

A thump, a creak, a snap. A scythe had broken up from the moss; the soldiers in the lead dropped flat; the scythe whipped past, a foot from Lord Faide's face. At the same time a plaintive cry came from the rear guard. 'They pursue! The First Folk come!'

Lord Faide turned to inspect the new threat. A clot of First Folk, two hundred or more, came across the moss, moving without haste of urgency. Some carried wasp tubes, others thorn-rapiers.

Lord Faide looked ahead. Another hundred yards should bring the army out upon safe ground; then he could deploy and maneuver. 'Forward!'

The column proceeded, the baggage train and the jinxmen's wagons pressing close up against the soldiers. Behind and to the side came the First Folk, moving casually and easily.

At last Lord Faide judged they had reached secure ground. 'Forward, now! Bring the wagons out, hurry now!'

The troops needed no urging; they trotted out over the heath, the wagons trundling after. Lord Faide ordered the wagons into a close double line, stationed the soldiers be-between, with the horses behind and protected from the wasps. The knights, now dismounted, waited in front.

The First Folk came listlessly, formlessly forward. Blank white faces stared; huge hands grasped tubes and thorns; traces of the purplish foam showed at the lips of their underarm orifices.

Lord Faide walked along the line of knights. 'Swords ready. Allow them as close as they care to come. Then a quick charge.' He motioned to the foot soldiers. 'Choose a target... !' A volley of darts whistled overhead, to plunge into white bodies. With chisel-bladed fingers the First Folk plucked them out, discarded them with no evidence of vexation. One or two staggered, wandered confusedly across the line of approach. Others raised their tubes, withdrew the shutter. Out flew the insects, horny wings rasping, prongs thrust forward. Across the moss they flickered, to crush themselves against the armor of the knights, to drop to the ground, to be stamped upon. The soldiers cranked their crossbows back into tension, discharged another flight of darts, caused several more First Folk casualties.

The First Folk spread into a long line, surrounding the Faide troops. Lord Faide shifted half his knights to the other side of the wagons.

The First Folk wandered closer. Lord Faide called for a charge. The knights stepped smartly forward, swords swinging. The First Folk advanced a few more steps, then stopped short. The flaps of skin at their backs swelled, pulsed; white foam gushed through their vents; clouds and billows rose up around them. The knights halted uncertainly, prodding and slashing into the foam but finding nothing. The foam piled higher, rolling in and forward, pushing the knights back toward the wagons. They looked questioningly toward Lord Faide.

Lord Faide waved his sword. 'Cut through to the other side! Forward!' Slashing two-handed with his sword, he sprang into the foam. He struck something solid, hacked blindly at it, pushed forward. Then his legs were seized; he

was upended and fell with a spine-rattling jar. Now he felt the grate of a thorn searching his armor. It found a crevice under his corselet and pierced him. Cursing he raised on his hands and knees, and plunged blindly forward. Enormous hard hands grasped him, heavy forms fell on his shoulders. He tried to breathe, but the foam clogged his visor; he began to smother. Staggering to his feet he half ran, half fell out into the open air, carrying two of the First Folk with him. He had lost his sword, but managed to draw his dagger. The First Folk released him and stepped back into the foam. Lord Faide sprang to his feet. Inside the foam came the sounds of combat; some of his knights burst into the open; others called for help. Lord Faide motioned to the knights. 'Back within; the devils slaughter our kinsmen! In and on to the center!'

He took a deep breath. Seizing his dagger he thrust himself back into the foam. A flurry of shapes came at him: he pounded with his fists, cut with his dagger, stumbled over a mass of living tissue. He kicked the softness, and stepped on metal. Bending, he grasped a leg but found it limp and dead. First Folk were on his back, another thorn found its mark; he groaned and thrust himself forward, and once again fell out into the open air.

A scant fifty of his knights had won back into the central clearing. Lord Faide cried out, 'To the center; mount your horses!' Abandoning his car, he himself vaulted into a saddle. The foam boiled and billowed closer. Lord Faide waved his arm. 'Forward, all; at a gallop! After us the wagons – out into the open!'

They charged, thrusting the frightened horses into the foam. There was white blindness, the feel of forms underneath, then the open air once again. Behind came the wagons, and the foot soldiers, running along the channel cut by the wagons. All won free – all but the knights who had fallen under the foam.

Two hundred yards from the great white clot of foam, Lord Faide halted, turned, looked back. He raised his fist, shook it in a passion. 'My knights, my car, my honor! I'll burn your forests, I'll drive you into the sea, there'll be no peace till all are dead!' He swung around. 'Come,' he called

bitterly to the remnants of his war party. 'We have been defeated. We retreat to Faide Keep.'

VIII

Faide Keep, like Ballant Keep, was constructed of a black, glossy substance, half metal, half stone, impervious to heat, force, and radiation. A parasol roof, designed to ward off hostile energy, rested on five squat outer towers, connected by walls almost as high as the lip of the overhanging roof.

The homecoming banquet was quiet and morose. The soldiers and knights ate lightly and drank much, but instead of becoming merry, lapsed into gloom. Lord Faide, overcome by emotion, jumped to his feet. 'Everyone sits silent, aching with rage. I feel no differently. We shall take revenge. We shall put the forests to the torch. The cursed white savages will smother and burn. Drink now with good cheer; not a moment will be wasted. But we must be ready. It is no more than idiocy to attack as before. Tonight I take council with the jinxmen, and we will start a program of affliction.'

The soldiers and knights rose to their feet, raised their cups and drank a somber toast. Lord Faide bowed and left the hall.

He went to his private trophy room. On the walls hung escutcheons, memorials, deathmasks, clusters of swords like many-petaled flowers; a rack of side arms, energy pistols, electric stilettos; a portrait of the original Faide, in ancient spacefarer's uniform, and a treasured, almost unique, photograph of the great ship that had brought the first Faide to Pangborn.

Lord Faide studied the ancient face for several moments, then summoned a servant. 'Ask the Head Jinxman to attend me.'

Hein Huss presently stumped into the room. Lord Faide turned away from the portrait, seated himself, motioned to Hein Huss to do likewise. 'What of the keep-lords?' he asked. 'How do they regard the setback at the hands of the First Folk?'

'There are various reactions,' said Hein Huss. 'At Bog-

hoten, Candelwade, and Havve there is distress and anger.'

Lord Faide nodded. 'These are my kinsmen.'

'At Gisborne, Graymar, Castle Cloud, and Alder there is satisfaction, veiled calculation.'

'To be expected,' muttered Lord Faide. 'These lords must be humbled; in spite of oaths and undertakings, they still think rebellion.'

'At Star Home, Julian-Douray, and Oak Hall I read surprise at the abilities of the First Folk, but in the main disinterest.'

Lord Faide nodded sourly. 'Well enough. There is no actual rebellion in prospect; we are free to concentrate on the First Folk. I will tell you what is in my mind. You report that new plantings are in progress between Wildwood, Old Forest, Sarrow Copse, and elsewhere – possibly with the intent of surrounding Faide Keep.' He looked inquiringly at Hein Huss, but no comment was forthcoming. Lord Faide continued. 'Possibly we have underestimated the cunning of the savages. They seem capable of forming plans and acting with almost human persistence. Or, I should say, more than human persistence, for it appears that after sixteen hundred years they still consider us invaders and hope to exterminate us.'

'That is my own conclusion,' said Hein Huss.

'We must take steps to strike first. I consider this a matter for the jinxmen. We gain no honor dodging wasps, falling into traps, or groping through foam. It is a needless waste of lives. Therefore, I want you to assemble your jinxmen, cabalmen, and spellbinders; I want you to formulate your most potent hoodoos—'

'Impossible.'

Lord Faide's black eyebrows rose high. '"Impossible"?'

Hein Huss seemed vaguely uncomfortable. 'I read the wonder in your mind. You suspect me of disinterest, irresponsibility. Not true. If the First Folk defeat you, we suffer likewise.'

'Exactly,' said Lord Faide dryly. 'You will starve.'

'Nevertheless, the jinxmen cannot help you.' He hoisted himself to his feet, started for the door.

'Sit,' said Lord Faide. 'It is necessary to pursue this matter.'

Hein Huss looked around with his bland, water-clear eyes. Lord Faide met his gaze. Hein Huss sighed deeply. 'I see I must ignore the precepts of my trade, break the habits of a lifetime. I must explain.' He took his bulk to the wall, fingered the side arms in the rack, studied the portrait of the ancestral Faide. 'These miracle workers of the old times – unfortunately we cannot use their magic! Notice the bulk of the spaceship! As heavy as Faide Keep.' He turned his gaze on the table, teleported a candelabra two or three inches. 'With considerably less effort they gave that spaceship enormous velocity, using ideas and forces they knew to be imaginary and irrational. We have advanced since then, of course. We no longer employ mysteries, arcane constructions, wild nonhuman forces. We are rational and practical – but we cannot achieve the effects of the ancient magicians.'

Lord Faide watched Hein Huss with saturnine eyes. Hein Huss gave his deep rumbling laugh. 'You think that I wish to distract you with talk? No, this is not the case. I am preparing to enlighten you.' He returned to his seat, lowered his bulk with a groan. 'Now I must talk at length, to which I am not accustomed. But you must be given to understand what we jinxmen can do and what we cannot do.

'First, unlike the ancient magicians, we are practical men. Naturally there is difference in our abilities. The best jinxman combines great telepathic facility, implacable personal force, and intimate knowledge of his fellow humans. He knows their acts, motives, desires, and fears; he understands the symbols that most vigorously represent these qualities. Jinxmanship in the main is drudgery – dangerous, difficult, and unromantic – with no mystery except that which we employ to confuse our enemies.' Hein Huss glanced at Lord Faide to encounter the same saturnine gaze. 'Ha! I still have told you nothing; I still have spent many words talking around my inability to confound the First Folk. Patience.'

'Speak on,' said Lord Faide.

'Listen then. What happens when I hoodoo a man? First I must enter into his mind telepathically. There are three operational levels: the conscious, the unconscious, the cellular. The most effective jinxing is done if all three levels are influenced. I feel into my victim, I learn as much as possible, supplementing my previous knowledge of him, which is part of my stock in trade. I take up his doll, which carries his traces. The doll is highly useful but not indispensable. It serves as a focus for my attention; it acts as a pattern, or a guide, as I fix upon the mind of the victim, and he is bound by his own telepathic capacity to the doll which bears his traces.

'So! Now! Man and doll are identified in my mind, and at one or more levels in the victim's mind. Whatever happens to the doll the victim feels to be happening to himself. There is no more to simple hoodooing than that, from the standpoint of the jinxman. But naturally the victims differ greatly. Susceptibility is the key idea here. Some men are more susceptible than others. Fear and conviction breed susceptibility. As a jinxman succeeds he becomes ever more feared, and consequently the more efficacious he becomes. The process is self-generative.

'Demon-possession is a similar technique. Susceptibility is again essential; again conviction creates susceptibility. It is easiest and most dramatic when the characteristics of the demon are well known, as in the case of Comandore's Keyril. For this reason, demons can be exchanged or traded among jinxmen. The commodity actually traded is public acceptance and familiarity with the demon.'

'Demons then do not actually exist?' inquired Lord Faide half-incredulously.

Hein Huss grinned vastly, showing enormous yellow teeth. 'Telepathy works through a superstratum. Who knows what is created in this superstratum? Maybe the demons live on after they have been conceived; maybe they now are real. This of course is speculation, which we jinxmen shun.

'So much for demons, so much for the lesser techniques of jinxmanship. I have explained sufficient to serve as background to the present situation.'

'Excellent,' said Lord Faide. 'Continue.'

'The question, then, is: How does one cast a hoodoo into a creature of an alien race?' He looked inquiringly at Lord Faide. 'Can you tell me?'

'I?' asked Lord Faide surprised. 'No.'

'The method is basically the same as in the hoodooing of men. It is necessary to make the creature believe, in every cell of his being, that he suffers or dies. This is where the problems begin to arise. Does the creature think – that is to say, does he arrange the processes of his life in the same manner as men? This is a very important distinction. Certain creatures of the universe use methods other than the human nerve-node system to control their environments. We call the human system "intelligence" – a word which properly should be restricted to human activity. Other creatures use different agencies, different systems, arriving sometimes at similar ends. To bring home these generalities, I cannot hope to merge my mind with the corresponding capacity in the First Folk. The key will not fit the lock. At least, not altogether. Once or twice when I watched the First Folk trading with men at Forest Market, I felt occasional weak significances. This implies that the First Folk mentality creates something similar to human telepathic impulses. Nevertheless, there is no real sympathy between the two races.

'This is the first and the least difficulty. If I were able to make complete telepathic contact – what then? The creatures are different from us. They have no words for "fear," "hate," "rage," "pain," "bravery," "cowardice." One may deduce that they do not feel these emotions. Undoubtedly they know other sensations, possibly as meaningful. Whatever these may be, they are unknown to me, and therefore I cannot either form or project symbols for these sensations.'

Lord Faide stirred impatiently. 'In short, you tell me that you cannot efficiently enter these creatures' minds; and that if you could, you do not know what influences you could plant there to do them harm.'

'Succinct,' agreed Hein Huss. 'Substantially accurate.'

Lord Faide rose to his feet. 'In that case you must repair these deficiencies. You must learn to telepathize with the

First Folk; you must find what influences will harm them. As quickly as possible.'

Hein Huss stared reproachfully at Lord Faide. 'But I have gone to great lengths to explain the difficulties involved! To hoodoo the First Folk is a monumental task! It would be necessary to enter Wildwood, to live with the First Folk, to become one of them, as my apprentice thought to become a tree. Even then an effective hoodoo is improbable! The First Folk must be susceptible to conviction! Otherwise there would be no bite to the hoodoo! I could guarantee no success. I would predict failure. No other jinxman would dare tell you this, no other would risk his *mana*. I dare because I am Hein Huss, with life behind me.'

'Nevertheless we must attempt every weapon at hand,' said Lord Faide in a dry voice. 'I cannot risk my knights, my kinsmen, my soldiers against these pallid half-creatures. What a waste of good flesh and blood to be stuck by a poison insect! You must go to Wildwood; you must learn how to hoodoo the First Folk.'

Hein Huss heaved himself erect. His great round face was stony; his eyes were like bits of water-worn glass. 'It is likewise a waste to go on a fool's errand. I am no fool, and I will not undertake a hoodoo which is futile from the beginning.'

'In that case,' said Lord Faide, 'I will find someone else.' He went to the door, summoned a servant. 'Bring Isak Comandore here.'

Hein Huss lowered his bulk into the chair. 'I will remain during the interview, with your permission.'

'As you wish.'

Isak Comandore appeared in the doorway, tall, loosely articulated, head hanging forward. He darted a glance of swift appraisal at Lord Faide, at Hein Huss, then stepped into the room.

Lord Faide crisply explained his desires. 'Hein Huss refuses to undertake the mission. Therefore I call on you.'

Isak Comandore calculated. The pattern of his thinking was clear: he possibly could gain much *mana*; there was small risk of diminution, for had not Hein Huss already dodged away from the project? Comandore nodded. 'Hein

Huss has made clear the difficulties; only a very clever and very lucky jinxman can hope to succeed. But I accept the challenge, I will go.'

'Good,' said Hein Huss. 'I will go, too.' Isak Comandore darted him a sudden hot glance. 'I wish only to observe. To Isak Comandore goes the responsibility and whatever credit may ensue.'

'Very well,' said Comandore presently. 'I welcome your company. Tomorrow morning we leave. I go to order our wagon.'

Late in the evening Apprentice Sam Salazar came to Hein Huss where he sat brooding in his workroom. 'What do you wish?' growled Huss.

'I have a request to make of you, Head Jinxman Huss.'

'Head Jinxman in name only,' grumbled Hein Huss. 'Isak Comandore is about to assume my position.'

Sam Salazar blinked, laughed uncertainly. Hein Huss fixed wintry-pale eyes on him. 'What do you wish?'

'I have heard that you go on an expedition to Wildwood, to study the First Folk.'

'True, true. What then?'

'Surely they will now attack all men?'

Hein Huss shrugged. 'At Forest Market they trade with men. At Forest Market men have always entered the forest. Perhaps there will be change, perhaps not.'

'I would go with you, if I may,' said Sam Salazar.

'This is no mission for apprentices.'

'An apprentice must take every opportunity to learn,' said Sam Salazar. 'Also you will need extra hands to set up tents, to load and unload cabinets, to cook, to fetch water, and other such matters.'

'Your argument is convincing,' said Hein Huss. 'We depart at dawn; be on hand.'

IX

As the sun lifted over the heath the jinxmen departed Faide Keep. The high-wheeled wagon creaked north over the moss, Hein Huss and Isak Comandore riding the front seat,

Sam Salazar with his legs hanging over the tail. The wagon rose and fell with the dips and mounds of the moss, wheels wobbling, and presently passed out of sight behind Skywatcher's Hill.

Five days later, an hour before sunset, the wagon reappeared. As before, Hein Huss and Isak Comandore rode the front seat, with Sam Salazar perched behind. They approached the keep, and without giving so much as a sign or a nod, drove through the gate into the courtyard.

Isak Comandore unfolded his long legs, stepped to the ground like a spider; Hein Huss lowered himself with a grunt. Both went to their quarters, while Sam Salazar led the wagon to the jinxmen's warehouse.

Somewhat later Isak Comandore presented himself to Lord Faide, who had been waiting in his trophy room, forced to a show of indifference through considerations of position, dignity, and protocol. Isak Comandore stood in the doorway, grinning like a fox. Lord Faide eyed him with sour dislike, waiting for Comandore to speak. Hein Huss might have stationed himself an entire day, eyes placidly fixed on Lord Faide, awaiting the first word; Isak Comandore lacked the absolute serenity. He came a step forward. 'I have returned from Wildwood.'

'With what results?'

'I believe that it is possible to hoodoo the First Folk.'

Hein Huss spoke from behind Comandore. 'I believe that such an undertaking, if feasible, would be useless, irresponsible, and possibly dangerous.' He lumbered forward.

Isak Comandore's eyes glowed hot red-brown; he turned back to Lord Faide. 'You ordered me forth on a mission; I will render a report.'

'Seat yourselves. I will listen.'

Isak Comandore, nominal head of the expedition, spoke. 'We rode along the river bank to Forest Market. Here was no sign of disorder or of hostility. A hundred First Folk traded timber, planks, posts, and poles for knife blades, iron wire, and copper pots. When they returned to their barge we followed them aboard, wagon, horses, and all. They showed no surprise—'

'Surprise,' said Hein Huss heavily, 'is an emotion of which they have no knowledge.'

Isak Comandore glared briefly. 'We spoke to the barge-tenders, explaining that we wished to visit the interior of Wildwood. We asked if the First Folk would try to kill us to prevent us from entering the forest. They professed indifference as to either our well-being or our destruction. This was by no means a guarantee of safe conduct; however, we accepted it as such, and remained aboard the barge.' He spoke on with occasional emendations from Hein Huss.

They had proceeded up the river, into the forest, the First Folk poling against the slow current. Presently they put away the poles; nevertheless the barge moved as before. The mystified jinxmen discussed the possibility of teleportation, or symbological force, and wondered if the First Folk had developed jinxing techniques unknown to men. Sam Salazar, however, noticed that four enormous water beetles, each twelve feet long with oil-black carapaces and blunt heads, had risen from the river bed and pushed the barge from behind – apparently without direction or command. The First Folk stood at the bow, turning the nose of the barge this way or that to follow the winding of the river. They ignored the jinxmen and Sam Salazar as if they did not exist.

The beetles swam tirelessly; the barge moved for four hours as fast as a man could walk. Occasionally, First Folk peered from the forest shadows, but none showed interest or concern in the barge's unusual cargo. By midafternoon the river widened, broke into many channels and became a marsh; a few minutes later the barge floated out into the open water of a small lake. Along the shore, behind the first line of trees appeared a large settlement. The jinxmen were interested and surprised. It had always been assumed that the First Folk wandered at random through the forest, as they had originally lived in the moss of the downs.

The barge grounded; the First Folk walked ashore, the men followed with the horses and wagon. Their immediate impressions were of swarming numbers, of slow but incessant activity, and they were attacked by an overpoweringly evil smell.

Ignoring the stench, the men brought the wagon in from the shore, paused to take stock of what they saw. The settlement appeared to be a center of many diverse activities. The trees had been stripped of lower branches, and supported blocks of hardened foam three hundred feet long, fifty feet high, twenty feet thick, with a space of a man's height intervening between the underside of the foam and the ground. There were a dozen of these blocks, apparently of cellular construction. Certain of the cells had broken open and seethed with small white fishlike creatures – the First Folk young.

Below the blocks masses of First Folk engaged in various occupations, in the main unfamiliar to the jinxmen. Leaving the wagon in the care of Sam Salazar, Hein Huss and Isak Comandore moved forward among the First Folk, repelled by the stench and the pressure of alien flesh, but drawn by curiosity. They were neither heeded nor halted; they wandered everywhere about the settlement. One area seemed to be an enormous zoo, divided into a number of sections. The purpose of one of these sections – a kind of range two hundred feet long – was all too clear. At one end a human corpse hung on a rope – a Faide casualty from the battle at the new planting. Certain of the wasps flew straight at the corpse; just before contact they were netted and removed. Others flew up and away or veered toward the First Folk who stood along the side of the range. These latter also were netted and killed at once.

The purpose of the business was clear enough. Examining some of the other activity in this new light, the jinxmen were able to interpret much that had hitherto puzzled them.

They saw beetles tall as dogs with heavy saw-toothed pincers attacking objects resembling horses; pens of insects even larger, long narrow, segmented, with dozens of heavy legs and nightmare heads. All these creatures – wasps, beetles, centipedes – in smaller and less formidable form were indigenous to the forest; it was plain that the First Folk had been practicing selective breeding for many years, perhaps centuries.

Not all the activity was warlike. Moths were trained to gather nuts, worms to gnaw straight holes through timber; in another section caterpillars chewed a yellow mash, molded it into identical spheres. Much of the evil odor emanated from the zoo; the jinxmen departed without reluctance, and returned to the wagon. Sam Salazar pitched the tent and built a fire, while Hein Huss and Isak Comandore discussed the settlement.

Night came; the blocks of foam glowed with imprisoned light; the activity underneath proceeded without cessation. The jinxmen retired to the tent and slept, while Sam Salazar stood guard.

The following day Hein Huss was able to engage one of the First Folk in conversation; it was the first attention of any sort given to them.

The conversation was long; Hein Huss reported only the gist of it to Lord Faide. (Isak Comandore turned away, ostentatiously disassociating himself from the matter.)

Hein Huss first of all had inquired as to the purpose of the sinister preparations: the wasps, beetles, centipedes, and the like.

'We intend to kill men,' the creature had reported ingenuously. 'We intend to return to the moss. This has been our purpose ever since men appeared on the planet.'

Huss had stated that such an ambition was shortsighted, that there was ample room for both men and First Folk on Pangborn. 'The First Folk,' said Hein Huss, 'should remove their traps and cease their efforts to surround the keeps with forest.'

'No,' came the response, 'men are intruders. They mar the beautiful moss. All will be killed.'

Isak Comandore returned to the conversation. 'I noticed here a significant fact. All the First Folk within sight had ceased their work; all looked toward us, as if they, too, participated in the discussion. I reached the highly important conclusion that the First Folk are not complete individuals but components of a larger unity, joined to a greater or less extent by a telepathic phase not unlike our own.'

Hein Huss continued placidly, 'I remarked that if we were attacked, many of the First Folk would perish. The creature showed no concern, and in fact implied much of what Jinxman Comandore had already induced: "There are always more in the cells to replace the elements which die. But if the community becomes sick, all suffer. We have been forced into the forests, into a strange existence. We must arm ourselves and drive away the men, and to this end we have developed the methods of men to our own purposes!" '

Isak Comandore spoke. 'Needless to say, the creature referred to the ancient men, not ourselves.'

'In any event,' said Lord Faide, 'they leave no doubt as to their intentions. We should be fools not to attack them at once, with every weapon at our disposal.'

Hein Huss continued imperturbably. 'The creature went on at some length. "We have learned the value of irrationality." "Irrationality" of course was not his word or even his meaning. He said something like "a series of vaguely motivated trials" – as close as I can translate. He said, "We have learned to change our environment. We use insects and trees and plants and waterslugs. It is an enormous effort for us who would prefer a placid life in the moss. But you men have forced this life on us, and now you must suffer the consequences." I pointed out once more that men were not helpless, that many First Folk would die. The creature seemed unworried. "The community persists." I asked a delicate question, "If your purpose is to kill men, why do you allow us here?" He said, "The entire community of men will be destroyed." Apparently they believe the human society to be similar to their own, and therefore regard the killing of three wayfaring individuals as pointless effort.'

Lord Faide laughed grimly. 'To destroy us they must first win past Hellmouth, then penetrate Faide Keep. This they are unable to do.'

Isak Comandore resumed his report. 'At this time I was already convinced that the problem was one of hoodooing not an individual but an entire race. In theory this should

be no more difficult than hoodooing one. It requires no more effort to speak to twenty than to one. With this end in view I ordered the apprentice to collect substances associated with the creatures. Skinflakes, foam, droppings, all other exudations obtainable. While he did so, I tried to put myself in rapport with the creatures. It is difficult, for their telepathy works across a different stratum from ours. Nevertheless, to a certain extent I have succeeded.'

'Then you can hoodoo the First Folk?' asked Lord Faide.

'I vouchsafe nothing until I try. Certain preparations must be made.'

'Go then; make your preparations.'

Comandore rose to his feet and with a sly side glance for Hein Huss left the room. Huss waited, pinching his chin with heavy fingers. Lord Faide looked at him coldly. 'You have something to add?'

Huss grunted, hoisted himself to his feet. 'I wish that I did. But my thoughts are confused. Of the many futures, all seem troubled and angry. Perhaps our best is not good enough.'

Lord Faide looked at Hein Huss with surprise; the massive Head Jinxman had never before spoken in terms so pessimistic and melancholy. 'Speak then; I will listen.'

Hein Huss said gruffly, 'If I knew any certainties I would speak gladly. But I am merely beset by doubts. I fear that we can no longer depend on logic and careful jinxmanship. Our ancestors were miracle workers, magicians. They drove the First Folk into the forest. To put us to flight in our turn the First Folk have adopted the ancient methods: random trial and purposeless empiricism. I am dubious. Perhaps we must turn our backs on sanity and likewise return to the mysticism of our ancestors.'

Lord Faide shrugged. 'If Isak Comandore can hoodoo the First Folk, such a retreat may be unnecessary.'

'The world changes,' said Hein Huss. 'Of so much I feel sure: the old days of craft and careful knowledge are gone. The future is for men of cleverness, of imagination untroubled by discipline; the unorthodox Sam Salazar may become more effective than I. The world changes.'

Lord Faide smiled his sour dyspeptic smile. 'When that day comes I will appoint Sam Salazar Head Jinxman and also name him Lord Faide, and you and I will retire together to a hut on the downs.'

Hein Huss made a heavy fateful gesture and departed.

X

Two days later Lord Faide, coming upon Isak Comandore, inquired as to his progress. Comandore took refuge in generalities. After another two days Lord Faide inquired again and this time insisted on particulars. Comandore grudgingly led the way to his workroom, where a dozen cabalmen, spellbinders, and apprentices worked around a large table, building a model of the First Folk settlement in Wildwood.

'Along the lakeshore,' said Comandore, 'I will range a great number of dolls, daubed with First Folk essences. When this is complete I will work up a hoodoo and blight the creatures.'

'Good. Perform well.' Lord Faide departed the workroom, mounted to the topmost pinnacle of the keep, to the cupola where the ancestral weapon Hellmouth was housed. 'Jambart! Where are you?'

Weapon-tender Jambart, short, blue-jowled, red-nosed and big-bellied, appeared. 'My lord?'

'I come to inspect Hellmouth. Is it prepared for instant use?'

'Prepared, my lord, and ready. Oiled, greased, polished, scraped, burnished, tended – every part smooth as an egg.'

Lord Faide made a scowling examination of Hellmouth – a heavy cylinder six feet in diameter, twelve feet long, studded with half-domes interconnected with tubes of polished copper. Jambart undoubtedly had been diligent. No trace of dirt or rust or corrosion showed; all was gleaming metal. The snout was covered with a heavy plate of metal and tarred canvas; the ring upon which the weapon swiveled was well greased.

Lord Faide surveyed the four horizons. To the south was

fertile Faide Valley; to the west open downs; to north and east the menacing loom of Wildwood.

He turned back to Hellmouth and pretended to find a smear of grease. Jambart boiled with expostulations and protestations; Lord Faide uttered a grim warning, enjoining less laxity, then descended to the workroom of Hein Huss. He found the Head Jinxman reclining on a couch, staring at the ceiling. At a bench stood Sam Salazar surrounded by bottles, flasks, and dishes.

Lord Faide stared balefully at the confusion. 'What are you doing?' he asked the apprentice.

Sam Salazar looked up guiltily. 'Nothing in particular, my lord.'

'If you are idle, go then and assist Isak Comandore.'

'I am not idle, Lord Faide.'

'Then what do you do?'

Sam Salazar gazed sulkily at the bench. 'I don't know.'

'Then you are idle!'

'No, I am occupied. I pour various liquids on this foam. It is First Folk foam. I wonder what will happen. Water does not dissolve it, nor spirits. Heat chars and slowly burns it, emitting a foul smoke.'

Lord Faide turned away with a sneer. 'You amuse yourself as a child might. Go to Isak Comandore; he can find use for you. How do you expect to become a jinxman, dabbling and prattling like a baby among pretty rocks?'

Hein Huss gave a deep sound: a mingling of sigh, snort, grunt, and clearing of the throat. 'He does no harm, and Isak Comandore has hands enough. Salazar will never become a jinxman; that has been clear a long time.'

Lord Faide shrugged. 'He is your apprentice, and your responsibility. Well, then. What news from the keeps?'

Hein Huss, groaning and wheezing, swung his legs over the edge of the couch. 'The lords share your concern, to greater or less extent. Your close allies will readily place troops at your disposal; the others likewise if pressure is brought to bear.'

Lord Faide nodded in dour satisfaction. 'For the moment there is no urgency. The First Folk hold to their forests. Faide Keep of course is impregnable, although they might

ravage the valley...' he paused thoughtfully. 'Let Isak Comandore cast his hoodoo. Then we will see.'

From the direction of the bench came a hiss, a small explosion, a whiff of acrid gas. Sam Salazar turned guiltily to look at them, his eyebrows singed. Lord Faide gave a snort of disgust and strode from the room.

'What did you do?' Hein Huss inquired in a colorless voice.

'I don't know.'

Now Hein Huss likewise snorted in disgust. 'Ridiculous. If you wish to work miracles, you must remember your procedures. Miracle working is not jinxmanship, with established rules and guides. In matters so complex it is well that you take notes, so that the miracles may be repeated.'

Sam Salazar nodded in agreement and turned back to the bench.

XI

Late during the day, news of new First Folk truculence reached Faide Keep. On Honeymoss Hill, not far west of Forest Market, a camp of shepherds had been visited by a wandering group of First Folk, who began to kill the sheep with thorn-swords. When the shepherds protested they, too, were attacked, and many were killed. The remainder of the sheep were massacred.

The following day came other news: four children swimming in Brastock River at Gilbert Ferry had been seized by enormous water-beetles and cut into pieces. On the other side of Wildwood, in the foothills immediately below Castle Cloud, peasants had cleared several hillsides and planted them to vines. Early in the morning they had discovered a horde of black disklike flukes devouring the vines – leaves, branches, trunks, and roots. They set about killing the flukes with spades and at once were stung to death by wasps.

Adam McAdam reported the incidents to Lord Faide, who went to Isak Comandore in a fury. 'How soon before you are prepared?'

'I am prepared now. But I must rest and fortify myself. Tomorrow morning I work the hoodoo.'

'The sooner the better! The creatures have left their forest; they are out killing men!'

Isak Comandore pulled his long chin. 'That was to be expected; they told us as much.'

Lord Faide ignored the remark. 'Show me your tableau.'

Isak Comandore took him into his workroom. The model was now complete, with the masses of simulated First Folk properly daubed and sensitized, each tied with a small wad of foam. Isak Comandore pointed to a pot of dark liquid. 'I will explain the basis of the hoodoo. When I visited the camp I watched everywhere for powerful symbols. Undoubtedly there were many at hand, but I could not discern them. However, I remembered a circumstance from the battle at the planting: when the creatures were attacked, threatened with fire and about to die, they spewed foam of dull purple color. Evidently this purple foam is associated with death. My hoodoo will be based upon this symbol.'

'Rest well, then, so that you may hoodoo to your best capacity.'

The following morning Isak Comandore dressed in long robes of black, and set a mask of the demon Nard on his head to fortify himself. He entered his workroom, closed the door.

An hour passed, two hours. Lord Faide sat at breakfast with his kin, stubbornly maintaining a pose of cynical unconcern. At last he could contain himself no longer and went out into the courtyard where Comandore's underlings stood fidgeting and uneasy. 'Where is Hein Huss?' demanded Lord Faide. 'Summon him here.'

Hein Huss came stumping out of his quarters. Lord Faide motioned to Comandore's workshop. 'What is happening? Is he succeeding?'

Hein Huss looked toward the workshop. 'He is casting a powerful hoodoo. I feel confusion, anger—'

'In Comandore, or in the First Folk?'

'I am not in rapport. I think he has conveyed a message to their minds. A very difficult task, as I explained to you. In this preliminary aspect he has succeeded.'

'"Preliminary"? What else remains?'

'The two most important elements of the hoodoo: the susceptibility of the victim and the appropriateness of the symbol.'

Lord Faide frowned. 'You do not seem optimistic.'

'I am uncertain. Isak Comandore may be right in his assumption. If so, and if the First Folk are highly susceptible, today marks a great victory, and Comandore will achieve tremendous *mana*!'

Lord Faide stared at the door to the workshop. 'What now?'

Hein Huss's eyes went blank with concentration. 'Isak Comandore is near death. He can hoodoo no more today.'

Lord Faide turned, waved his arm to the cabalmen. 'Enter the workroom! Assist your master!'

The cabalmen raced to the door, flung it open. Presently they emerged supporting the limp form of Isak Comandore, his black robe spattered with purple foam. Lord Faide pressed close. 'What did you achieve? Speak!'

Isak Comandore's eyes were half closed, his mouth hung loose and wet. 'I spoke to the First Folk, to the whole race. I sent the symbol into their minds—' His head fell limply sidewise.

Lord Faide moved back. 'Take him to his quarters. Put him on his couch.' He turned away, stood indecisively, chewing at his drooping lower lip. 'Still we do not know the measure of his success.'

'Ah,' said Hein Huss, 'but we do!'

Lord Faide jerked around. 'What is this? What do you say?'

'I saw into Comandore's mind. He used the symbol of purple foam; with tremendous effort he drove it into their minds. Then he learned that purple foam means not death – purple foam means fear for the safety of the community, purple foam means desperate rage.'

'In any event,' said Lord Faide after a moment, 'there is no harm done. The First Folk can hardly become more hostile.'

Three hours later a scout rode furiously into the courtyard, threw himself off his horse, ran to Lord Faide. 'The

First Folk have left the forest! A tremendous number! Thousands! They are advancing on Faide Keep!'

'Let them advance!' said Lord Faide. 'The more the better! Jambart, where are you?'

'Here, sir.'

'Prepare Hellmouth! Hold all in readiness!'

'Hellmouth is always ready, sir!'

Lord Faide struck him across the shoulders. 'Off with you! Bernard!'

The sergeant of the Faide troops came forward. 'Ready, Lord Faide.'

'The First Folk attack. Armor your men against wasps, feed them well. We will need all our strength.'

Lord Faide turned to Hein Huss. 'Send to the keeps, to the manor houses, order our kinsmen to join us, with all their troops and all their armor. Send to Bellgard Hall, to Boghoten, Camber, and Candelwade. Haste, haste, it is only hours from Wildwood.'

Huss held up his hand. 'I have already done so. The keeps are warned. They know your need.'

'And the First Folk – can you feel their minds?'

'No.'

Lord Faide walked away. Hein Huss lumbered out the main gate, walked around the keep, casting appraising glances up the black walls of the squat towers, windowless and proof even against the ancient miracle-weapons. High on top of the great parasol roof Jambart the weapon-tender worked in the cupola, polishing that which already glistened, greasing surfaces already heavy with grease.

Hein Huss returned within. Lord Faide approached him, mouth hard, eyes bright. 'What have you seen?'

'Only the keep, the walls, the towers, the roof, and Hellmouth.'

'And what do you think?'

'I think many things.'

'You are noncommittal; you know more than you say. It is best that you speak, because if Faide Keep falls to the savages you die with the rest of us.'

Hein Huss's water-clear eyes met the brilliant black gaze of Lord Faide. 'I know only what you know. The First Folk

attack. They have proved they are not stupid. They intend to kill us. They are not jinxmen; they cannot afflict us or force us out. They cannot break in the walls. To burrow under, they must dig through solid rock. What are their plans? I do not know. Will they succeed? Again, I do not know. But the day of the jinxman and his orderly array of knowledge is past. I think that we must grope for miracles, blindly and foolishly, like Salazar pouring liquids on foam.'

A troop of armored horsemen rode in through the gates: warriors from nearby Bellgard Hall. And as the hours passed contingents from other keeps came to Faide Keep, until the courtyard was dense with troops and horses.

Two hours before sunset the First Folk were sighted across the downs. They seemed a very large company, moving in an undisciplined clot with a number of stragglers, forerunners and wanderers out on the flanks.

The hotbloods from outside keeps came clamoring to Lord Faide, urging a charge to cut down the First Folk; they found no seconding voices among the veterans of the battle at the planting. Lord Faide, however, was pleased to see the dense mass of First Folk. 'Let them approach only a mile more – and Hellmouth will take them! Jambart!'

'At your call, Lord Faide.'

'Come, Hellmouth speaks!' He strode away with Jambart after. Up to the cupola they climbed.

'Roll forth Hellmouth, direct it against the savages!'

Jambart leaped to the glistening array of wheels and levers. He hesitated in perplexity, then tentatively twisted a wheel. Hellmouth responded by twisting slowly around on its radial track, to the groan and chatter of long-frozen bearings. Lord Faide's brows lowered into a menacing line. 'I hear evidence of neglect.'

'Neglect, my lord, never! Find one spot of rust, a shadow of grime, you may have me whipped!'

'What of the sound?'

'That is internal and invisible – none of my responsibility.'

Lord Faide said nothing. Hellmouth now pointed toward the great pale tide from Wildwood. Jambart twisted a second wheel and Hellmouth thrust forth its heavy snout.

Lord Faide, in a voice harsh with anger, cried, 'The cover, fool!'

'An oversight, my lord, easily repaired.' Jambart crawled out along the top of Hellmouth, clinging to the protuberances for dear life, with below only the long smooth sweep of roof. With considerable difficulty he tore the covering loose, then grunting and cursing, inched himself back, jerking with his knees, rearing his buttocks.

The First Folk had slowed their pace a trifle, the main body only a half-mile distant.

'Now,' said Lord Faide in high excitement, 'before they disperse, we exterminate them!' He sighted through a telescopic tube, squinting through the dimness of internal films and incrustations, signaled to Jambart for the final adjustments. 'Now! Fire!'

Jambart pulled the firing lever. Within the great metal barrel came a splutter of clicking sounds. Hellmouth whined, roared. Its snout glowed red, orange, white, and out poured a sudden gout of blazing purple radiation – which almost instantly died. Hellmouth's barrel quivered with heat, fumed, seethed, hissed. From within came a faint pop. Then there was silence.

A hundred yards in front of the First Folk a patch of moss burnt black where the bolt had struck. The aiming device was inaccurate. Hellmouth's bolt had killed perhaps twenty of the First Folk vanguard.

Lord Faide made feverish signals. 'Quick! Raise the barrel. Now! Fire again!'

Jambart pulled the firing arm, to no avail. He tried again, with the same lack of success. 'Hellmouth evidently is tired.'

'Hellmouth is dead,' cried Lord Faide. 'You have failed me. Hellmouth is extinct.'

'No, no,' protested Jambart. 'Hellmouth rests! I nurse it as my own child! It is polished like glass! Whenever a section wears off or breaks loose, I neatly remove the fracture, and every trace of cracked glass.'

Lord Faide threw up his arms, shouted in vast, inarticulate grief, ran below. 'Huss! Hein Huss!'

Hein Huss presented himself. 'What is your will?'

'Hellmouth has given up its fire. Conjure me more fire for Hellmouth, and quickly!'

'Impossible.'

'Impossible!' cried Lord Faide. 'That is all I hear from you! Impossible, useless, impractical! You have lost your ability. I will consult Isak Comandore.'

'Isak Comandore can put no more fire into Hellmouth than can I.'

'What sophistry is this? He puts demons into men, surely he can put fire into Hellmouth!'

'Come, Lord Faide, you are overwrought. You know the difference between jinxmanship and miracle working.'

Lord Faide motioned to a servant. 'Bring Isak Comandore here to me!'

Isak Comandore, face haggard, skin waxy, limped into the courtyard. Lord Faide waved peremptorily. 'I need your skill. You must restore fire to Hellmouth.'

Comandore darted a quick glance at Hein Huss, who stood solid and cold. Comandore decided against dramatic promises that could not be fulfilled. 'I cannot do this, my lord.'

'What! You tell me this, too?'

'Remark the difference, Lord Faide, between man and metal. A man's normal state is something near madness; he is at all times balanced on a knife-edge between hysteria and apathy. His senses tell him far less of the world than he thinks they do. It is a simple trick to deceive a man, to possess him with a demon, to drive him out of his mind, to kill him. But metal is insensible; metal reacts only as its shape and condition dictates, or by the working of miracles.'

'Then you must work miracles!'

'Impossible.'

Lord Faide drew a deep breath, collected himself. He walked swiftly across the court. 'My armor, my horse. We attack.'

The column formed, Lord Faide at the head. He led the knights through the portals, with armored footmen behind.

'Beware the foam!' called Lord Faide. 'Attack, strike, cut, draw back. Keep your visors drawn against the wasps! Each man must kill a hundred! Attack!'

The troop rode forth against the horde of First Folk,

knights in the lead. The hooves of the horses pounded softly over the thick moss; in the west the large pale sun hung close to the horizon.

Two hundred yards from the First Folk the knights touched the club-headed horses into a lope. They raised their swords, and shouting, plunged forward, each man seeking to be first. The clotted mass of First Folk separated: black beetles darted forth and after them long segmented centipede creatures. They dashed among the horses, mandibles clicking, snouts slashing. Horses screamed, reared, fell over backwards; beetles cut open armored knights as a dog cracks a bone. Lord Faide's horse threw him and ran away; he picked himself up, hacked at a nearby beetle, lopped off its front leg. It darted forward, he lopped off the leg opposite; the heavy head dipped, tore up the moss. Lord Faide cut off the remaining legs, and it lay helpless.

'Retreat,' he bellowed. 'Retreat!'

The knights moved back, slashing and hacking at beetles and centipedes, killing or disabling all which attacked.

'Form into a double line, knights and men. Advance slowly, supporting each other!'

The men advanced. The First Folk dispersed to meet them, armed with their thorn-swords and carrying pouches. Ten yards from the men they reached into the pouches, brought dark balls which they threw at the men. The balls broke and spattered on the armor.

'Charge!' bawled Lord Faide. The men sprang forward into the mass of First Folk, cutting, slashing, killing. 'Kill!' called Lord Faide in exultation. 'Leave not one alive!'

A pang struck him, a sting inside his armor, followed by another and another. Small things crawled inside the metal, stinging, biting, crawling. He looked about: on all sides were harassed expressions, faces working in anguish. Sword arms fell limp as hands beat on the metal, futilely trying to scratch, rub. Two men suddenly began to tear off their armor.

'Retreat,' cried Lord Faide. 'Back to the keep!'

The retreat was a rout, the soldiers shedding articles of armor as they ran. After them came a flight of wasps – a

dozen or more, and half as many men cried out as the poison prongs struck into their backs.

Inside the keep stormed the disorganized company, casting aside the last of their armor, slapping their skin, scratching, rubbing, crushing the ferocious red mites that infested them.

'Close the gates,' roared Lord Faide.

The gates slid shut. Faide Keep was besieged.

XII

During the night the First Folk surrounded the keep, forming a ring fifty yards from the walls. All night there was motion, ghostly shapes coming and going in the starlight.

Lord Faide watched from a parapet until midnight, with Hein Huss at his side. Repeatedly, he asked, 'What of the other keeps? Do they send further reinforcements?' to which Hein Huss each time gave the same reply: 'There is confusion and doubt. The keep-lords are anxious to help but do not care to throw themselves away. At this moment they consider and take stock of the situation.'

Lord Faide at last left the parapet, signaling Hein Huss to follow. He went to his trophy room, threw himself into a chair, motioned Hein Huss to be seated. For a moment he fixed the jinxman with a cool, calculating stare. Hein Huss bore the appraisal without discomfort.

'You are Head Jinxman,' said Lord Faide finally. 'For twenty years you have worked spells, cast hoodoos, performed auguries – more effectively than any other jinxman of Pangborn. But now I find you inept and listless. Why is this?'

'I am neither inept nor listless. I am unable to achieve beyond my abilities. I do not know how to work miracles. For this you must consult my apprentice Sam Salazar, who does not know either, but who earnestly tries every possibility and many impossibilities.'

'You believe in this nonsense yourself! Before my very eyes you become a mystic!'

Hein Huss shrugged. 'There are limitations to my knowledge. Miracles occur – that we know. The relics of our ancestors lie everywhere. Their methods were supernatural, repellent to our own mental processes – but think! Using these same methods the First Folk threaten to destroy us. In the place of metal they use living flesh – but the result is similar. The men of Pangborn, if they assemble and accept casualties, can drive the First Folk back to Wildwood – but for how long? A year? Ten years? The First Folk plant new trees, dig more traps – and presently come forth again, with more terrible weapons: flying beetles, large as a horse; wasps strong enough to pierce armor, lizards to scale the walls of Faide Keep.'

Lord Faide pulled at his chin. 'And the jinxmen are helpless?'

'You saw for yourself. Isak Comandore intruded enough into their consciousness to anger them, no more.'

'So then – what must we do?'

Hein Huss held out his hands. 'I do not know. I am Hein Huss, jinxman. I watch Sam Salazar with fascination. He learns nothing, but he is either too stupid or too intelligent to be discouraged. If this is the way to work miracles, he will work them.'

Lord Faide rose to his feet. 'I am deathly tired. I cannot think, I must sleep. Tomorrow we will know more.'

Hein Huss left the trophy room, returned to the parapet. The ring of First Folk seemed closer to the walls, almost within dart-range. Behind them and across the moors stretched a long pale column of marching First Folk. A little back from the keep a pile of white material began to grow, larger and larger as the night proceeded.

Hours passed, the sky lightened; the sun rose in the east. The First Folk tramped the downs like ants, bringing long bars of hardened foam down from the north, dropping them into piles around the keep, returning into the north once more.

Lord Faide came up on the parapet, haggard and unshaven. 'What is this? What do they do?'

Bernard the sergeant responded. 'They puzzle us all, my lord.'

'Hein Huss! What of the other keeps?'

'They have armed and mounted; they approach cautiously.'

'Can you communicate our urgency?'

'I can, and I have done so. I have only accentuated their caution.'

'Bah!' cried Lord Faide in disgust. 'Warriors they call themselves! Loyal and faithful allies!'

'They know of your bitter experience,' said Hein Huss. 'They ask themselves, reasonably enough, what they can accomplish which you who are already here cannot do first.'

Lord Faide laughed sourly. 'I have no answer for them. In the meantime we must protect ourselves against the wasps. Armor is useless; they drive us mad with mites... Bernard!'

'Yes, Lord Faide.'

'Have each of your men construct a frame two-feet square, fixed with a short handle. To these frames should be sewed a net of heavy mesh. When these frames are built we will sally forth, two soldiers to guard one half-armored knight on foot.'

'In the meantime,' said Hein Huss, 'the First Folk proceed with their plans.'

Lord Faide turned to watch. The First Folk came close up under the walls carrying rods of hardened foam. 'Bernard! Put your archers to work! Aim for the heads!'

Along the walls bowmen cocked their weapons. Darts spun down into the First Folk. A few were affected, turned and staggered away; others plucked away the bolts without concern. Another flight of bolts, a few more First Folk were disabled. The others planted the rods in the moss, exuded foam in great gushes, their back-flaps vigorously pumping air. Other First Folk brought more rods, pushed them into the foam. Entirely around the keep, close under the walls, extended the mound of foam. The ring of First Folk now came close and all gushed foam; it bulked up swiftly. More

rods were brought, thrust into the foam, reinforcing and stiffening the mass.

'More darts!' barked Lord Faide. 'Aim for the heads! Bernard – your men, have they prepared the wasp nets?'

'Not yet, Lord Faide. The project requires some little time.'

Lord Faide became silent. The foam, now ten feet high, rapidly piled higher. Lord Faide turned to Hein Huss. 'What do they hope to achieve?'

Hein Huss shook his head. 'For the moment I am uncertain.'

The first layer of foam had hardened; on top of this the First Folk spewed another layer, reinforcing again with the rods, crisscrossing, horizontal and vertical. Fifteen minutes later, when the second layer was hard the First Folk emplaced and mounted rude ladders to raise a third layer. Surrounding the keep now was a ring of foam thirty feet high and forty feet thick at the base.

'Look,' said Hein Huss. He pointed up. The parasol roof overhanging the walls ended only thirty feet above the foam. 'A few more layers and they will reach the roof.'

'So then?' asked Lord Faide. 'The roof is as strong as the walls.'

'And we will be sealed within.'

Lord Faide studied the foam in the light of this new thought. Already the First Folk, climbing laboriously up ladders along the outside face of their wall of foam, were preparing to lay on a fourth layer. First – rods, stiff and dry, then great gushes of white. Only twenty feet remained between roof and foam.

Lord Faide turned to the sergeant. 'Prepare the men to sally forth.'

'What of the wasp nets, sir?'

'Are they almost finished?'

'Another ten minutes, sir.'

'Another ten minutes will see us smothering. We must force a passage through the foam.'

Ten minutes passed, and fifteen. The First Folk created ramps behind their wall: first, dozens of the rods, then foam, and on top, to distribute the weight, reed mats.

Bernard the sergeant reported to Lord Faide. 'We are ready.'

'Good.' Lord Faide descended into the courtyard. He faced the men, gave them their orders. 'Move quickly, but stay together; we must not lose ourselves in the foam. As we proceed, slash ahead and to the sides. The First Folk see through the foam; they have the advantage of us. When we break through, we use the wasp nets. Two foot soldiers must guard each knight. Remember, quickly through the foam, that we do not smother. Open the gates.'

The gates slid back, the troops marched forth. They faced an unbroken blank wall of foam. No enemy could be seen.

Lord Faide waved his sword. 'Into the foam.' He strode forward, pushed into the white mass, now crisp and brittle and harder than he had bargained for. It resisted him; he cut and hacked. His troops joined him, carving a way into the foam. First Folk appeared above them, crawling carefully on the mats. Their back flaps puffed, pumped; foam issued from their vents, falling in a cascade over the troops.

Hein Huss sighed. He spoke to Apprentice Sam Salazar. 'Now they must retreat, otherwise they smother. If they fail to win through, we all smother.'

Even as he spoke the foam, piling up swiftly, in places reached the roof. Below, bellowing and cursing, Lord Faide backed out from under, wiped his face clear. Once again, in desperation, he charged forward, trying at a new spot.

The foam was friable and cut easily, but the chunks detached still blocked the opening. And again down tumbled a cascade of foam, covering the soldiers.

Lord Faide retreated, waved his men back into the keep. At the same moment First Folk crawling on mats on the same level as the parapet over the gate laid rods up from the foam to rest against the projecting edge of the roof. They gushed foam; the view of the sky was slowly blocked from the view of Hein Huss and Sam Salazar.

'In an hour, perhaps two, we will die,' said Hein Huss. 'They have now sealed us in. There are many men here in the keep, and all will now breathe deeply.'

Sam Salazar said nervously, 'There is a possibility we might be able to survive – or at least not smother.'

'Ah?' inquired Hein Huss with heavy sarcasm. 'You plan to work a miracle?'

'If a miracle, the most trivial sort. I observed that water has no effect on the foam, nor a number of other liquids: milk, spirits, wine, or caustic. Vinegar, however, instantly dissolves the foam.'

'Aha,' said Hein Huss. 'We must inform Lord Faide.'

'Better that you do so,' said Sam Salazar. 'He will pay me no heed.'

XIII

Half an hour passed. Light filtered into Faide Keep only as a dim gray gloom. Air tasted flat, damp, and heavy. Out from the gates sallied the troops. Each carried a crock, a jug, a skin, or a pan containing strong vinegar.

'Quickly now,' called Lord Faide. 'but careful! Spare the vinegar, don't throw it wildly. In close formation now – forward.'

The soldiers approached the wall, threw ladles of vinegar ahead. The foam crackled, melted.

'Waste no vinegar,' shouted Lord Faide. 'Forward, quickly now; bring forward the vinegar!'

Minutes later they burst out upon the downs. The First Folk stared at them, blinking.

'Charge,' croaked Lord Faide, his throat thick with fumes. 'Mind now, wasp nets! Two soldiers to each knight! Charge, double-quick. Kill the white beasts.'

The men dashed ahead. Wasp tubes were leveled. 'Halt!' yelled Lord Faide. 'Wasps!'

The wasps came, wings rasping. Nets rose up; wasps struck with a thud. Down went the nets; hard feet crushed the insects. The beetles and the lizard-centipedes appeared, not so many as of the last evening, for a great number had been killed. They darted forward, and a score of men died, but the insects were soon hacked into chunks of reeking brown flesh. Wasps flew, and some struck home; the agonies of the dying men were unnerving. Presently the wasps likewise decreased in number, and soon there were no more.

The men faced the First Folk, armed only with thorn-swords and their foam, which now came purple with rage.

Lord Faide waved his sword; the men advanced and began to kill the First Folk, by dozens, by hundreds.

Hein Huss came forth and approached Lord Faide. 'Call a halt.'

'A halt? Why? Now we kill these bestial things.'

'Far better not. Neither need kill the other. Now is the time to show great wisdom.'

'They have besieged us, caught us in their traps, stung us with their wasps! And you say halt?'

'They nourish a grudge sixteen hundred years old. Best not to add another one.'

Lord Faide stared at Hein Huss. 'What do you propose?'

'Peace between the two races, peace and cooperation.'

'Very well. No more traps, no more plantings, no more breeding of deadly insects.'

'Call back your men. I will try.'

Lord Faide cried out, 'Men, fall back, Disengage.'

Reluctantly the troops drew back. Hein Huss approached the huddled mass of purple-foaming First Folk. He waited a moment. They watched him intently. He spoke in their language.

'You have attacked Faide Keep; you have been defeated. You planned well, but we have proved stronger. At this moment we can kill you. Then we can go on to fire the forest, starting a hundred blazes. Some of the fires you can control. Others not. We can destroy Wildwood. Some First Folk may survive, to hide in the thickets and breed new plans to kill men. This we do not want. Lord Faide has agreed to peace, if you likewise agree. This means no more death traps. Men will freely approach and pass through the forests. In your turn you may freely come out on the moss. Neither race shall molest the other. Which do you choose? Extinction – or peace?'

The purple foam no longer dribbled from the vents of the First Folk. 'We choose peace.'

'There must be no more wasps, beetles. The death traps must be disarmed and never replaced.'

'We agree. In our turn we must be allowed freedom of the moss.'

'Agreed. Remove your dead and wounded, haul away the foam rods.'

Hein Huss returned to Lord Faide. 'They have chosen peace.'

Lord Faide nodded. 'Very well. It is for the best.' He called to his men. 'Sheathe your weapons. We have won a great victory.' He ruefully surveyed Faide Keep, swathed in foam and invisible except for the parasol roof. 'A hundred barrels of vinegar will not be enough.'

Hein Huss looked off into the sky. 'Your allies approach quickly. Their jinxmen have told them of your victory.'

Lord Faide laughed his sour laugh. 'To my allies will fall the task of removing the foam from Faide Keep.'

XIV

In the hall of Faide Keep, during the victory banquet, Lord Faide called jovially across to Hein Huss. 'Now, Head Jinxman, we must deal with your apprentice, the idler and the waster Sam Salazar.'

'He is here, Lord Faide. Rise, Sam Salazar, take cognizance of the honor being done you.'

Sam Salazar rose to his feet, bowed.

Lord Faide proffered him a cup. 'Drink, Sam Salazar, enjoy yourself. I freely admit that your idiotic tinkerings saved the lives of us all. Sam Salazar, we salute you, and thank you. Now, I trust that you will put frivolity aside, apply yourself to your work, and learn honest jinxmanship. When the time comes, I promise that you shall find a lifetime of employment at Faide Keep.'

'Thank you,' said Sam Salazar modestly. 'However, I doubt if I will become a jinxman.'

'No? You have other plans?'

Sam Salazar stuttered, grew faintly pink in the face, then straightened himself, and spoke as clearly and distinctly as he could. 'I prefer to continue what you call my frivolity. I hope I can persuade others to join me.'

'Frivolity is always attractive,' said Lord Faide. 'No doubt you can find other idlers and wasters, runaway farm boys, and the like.'

Sam Salazar said staunchly, 'This frivolity might become serious. Undoubtedly the ancients were barbarians. They used symbols to control entities they were unable to understand. We are methodical and rational; why can't we systematize and comprehend the ancient miracles?'

'Well, why can't we?' asked Lord Faide. 'Does anyone have an answer?'

No one responded, although Isak Comandore hissed between his teeth and shook his head.

'I personally may never be able to work miracles; I suspect it is more complicated than it seems,' said Sam Salazar. 'However, I hope that you will arrange for a workshop where I and others who might share my views can make a beginning. In this matter I have the encouragement and the support of Head Jinxman Hein Huss.'

Lord Faide lifted his goblet. 'Very well, Apprentice Sam Salazar. Tonight I can refuse you nothing. You shall have exactly what you wish, and good luck to you. Perhaps you will produce a miracle during my lifetime.'

Isak Comandore said huskily to Hein Huss, 'This is a sad event! It signalizes intellectual anarchy, the degradation of jinxmanship, the prostitution of logic. Novelty has a way of attracting youth; already I see apprentices and spellbinders whispering in excitement. The jinxmen of the future will be sorry affairs. How will they go about demon-possession? With a cog, a gear, and a push-button. How will they cast a hoodoo? They will find it easier to strike their victim with an axe.'

'Times change,' said Hein Huss. 'There is now the one rule of Faide on Pangborn, and the keeps no longer need to employ us. Perhaps I will join Sam Salazar in his workshop.'

'You depict a depressing future,' said Isak Comandore with a sniff of disgust.

'There are many futures, some of which are undoubtedly depressing.'

Lord Faide raised his glass. 'To the best of your many

futures, Hein Huss. Who knows? Sam Salazar may conjure a spaceship to lead us back to home-planet.'

'Who knows?' said Hein Huss. He raised his goblet. 'To the best of the futures!'

Seguilo could not have gone far; there was no place for him to go. Once Perrin had searched the lighthouse and the lonesome acre of rock, there were no other possibilities – only the sky and the ocean.

Seguilo was neither inside the lighthouse nor was he outside.

Perrin went out into the night, squinted up against the five moons. Seguilo was not to be seen on top of the lighthouse.

Seguilo had disappeared.

Perrin looked indecisively over the flowing brine of Maurnilam Var. Had Seguilo slipped on the damp rock and fallen into the sea, he certainly would have called out... The five moons blinked, dazzled, glinted along the surface; Seguilo might even now be floating unseen a hundred yards distant.

Perrin shouted across the dark water: 'Seguilo!'

He turned, once more looked up at the face of the lighthouse. Around the horizon whirled the twin shafts of red and white light, guiding the barges crossing from South Continent to Spacetown, warning them off Isel Rock.

Perrin walked quickly toward the lighthouse; Seguilo was no doubt asleep in his bunk, or in the bathroom.

Perrin went to the top chamber, circled the lumenifer, climbed down the stairs. 'Seguilo!'

No answer. The lighthouse returned a metallic vibrating echo.

Seguilo was not in his room, in the bathroom, in the commissary, or in the storeroom. Where else could a man go?

Perrin looked out the door. The five moons cast confusing shadows. He saw a gray blot – 'Seguilo!' He ran outside. 'Where have you been?'

Seguilo straightened to his full height, a thin man with a wise, doleful face. He turned his head; the wind blew his words past Perrin's ears.

Sudden enlightenment came to Perrin. 'You must have been under the generator!' The only place he could have been.

Seguilo had come closer. 'Yes ... I was under the generator.' He paused uncertainly by the door, stood looking up at the moons, which this evening had risen all bunched together. Puzzlement creased Perrin's forehead. Why should Seguilo crawl under the generator? 'Are you ... well?'

'Yes. Perfectly well.'

Perrin stepped closer and in the light of the five moons, Ista, Bista, Liad, Miad, and Poidel, scrutinized Seguilo sharply. His eyes were dull and noncommittal; he seemed to carry himself stiffly. 'Have you hurt yourself? Come over to the steps and sit down.'

'Very well.' Seguilo ambled across the rock, sat down on the steps.

'You're certain you're all right?'

'Certain.'

After a moment, Perrin said, 'Just before you ... went under the generator, you were about to tell me something you said was important.'

Seguilo nodded slowly. 'That's true.'

'What was it?'

Seguilo stared dumbly up into the sky. There was nothing to be heard but the wash of the sea, hissing and rushing where the rock shelved under.

'Well?' asked Perrin finally. Seguilo hesitated. 'You said that when five moons rose together in the sky, it was not wise to believe anything.'

'Ah,' nodded Seguilo, 'so I did.'

'What did you mean?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Why is not believing anything important?'

'I don't know.'

Perrin rose abruptly to his feet. Seguilo normally was crisp, dryly emphatic. 'Are you sure you're all right?'

'Right as rain.'

That was more like Seguilo. 'Maybe a drink of whiskey would fix you up.'

'Sounds like a good idea.'

Perrin knew where Seguilo kept his private store. 'You sit here, I'll get you a shot.'

'Yes, I'll sit here.'

Perrin hurried inside the lighthouse, clambered the two flights of stairs to the commissary. Seguilo might remain seated or he might not; something in his posture, in the rapt gaze out to sea, suggested that he might not. Perrin found the bottle and a glass, ran back down the steps. Somehow he knew that Seguilo would be gone.

Seguilo was gone. He was not on the steps, nowhere on the windy acre of Isel Rock. It was impossible that he had passed Perrin on the stairs. He might have slipped into the engine room and crawled under the generator once more.

Perrin flung open the door, switched on the lights, stooped, peered under the housing. Nothing.

A greasy film of dust, uniform, unmarred, indicated that no one had ever been there.

Where was Seguilo?

Perrin went up to the top-most part of the lighthouse, carefully searched every nook and cranny down to the outside entrance. No Seguilo.

Perrin walked out on the rock. Bare and empty; no Seguilo.

Seguilo was gone. The dark water of Maurnilam Var sighed and flowed across the shelf.

Perrin opened his mouth to shout across the moon-dazzled swells, but somehow it did not seem right to shout. He went back to the lighthouse, seated himself before the radio transceiver.

Uncertainly he touched the dials; the instrument had been Seguilo's responsibility. Seguilo had built it himself, from parts salvaged from a pair of old instruments.

Perrin tentatively flipped a switch. The screen sputtered into light, the speaker hummed and buzzed. Perrin made hasty adjustments. The screen streaked with darts of blue light, a spatter of quick, red blots. Fuzzy, dim, a face looked forth from the screen. Perrin recognized a junior clerk in

the Commission office at Spacetown. He spoke urgently. 'This is Harold Perrin, at Isel Rock Lighthouse; send out a relief ship.'

The face in the screen looked at him as through thick pebbleglass. A faint voice, overlaid by sputtering and crackling, said, 'Adjust your tuning . . . I can't hear you . . .'

Perrin raised his voice. 'Can you hear me now?'

The face in the screen wavered and faded.

Perrin yelled, 'This is Isel Rock Lighthouse! Send out a relief ship! Do you hear? There's been an accident!'

'. . . signals not coming in. Make out a report, send . . .' the voice sputtered away.

Cursing furiously under his breath, Perrin twisted knobs, flipped switches. He pounded the set with his fist. The screen flashed bright orange, went dead.

Perrin ran behind, worked an anguished five minutes, to no avail. No light, no sound.

Perrin slowly rose to his feet. Through the window he glimpsed the five moons racing for the west. 'When the five moons rise together,' Seguilo had said, 'it's not wise to believe anything.' Seguilo was gone. He had been gone once before and come back; maybe he would come back again. Perrin grimaced, shuddered. It would be best now if Seguilo stayed away. He ran down to the outer door, barred and bolted it. Hard on Seguilo, if he came wandering back. . . Perrin leaned a moment with his back to the door, listening. Then he went to the generator room, looked under the generator. Nothing. He shut the door, climbed the steps.

Nothing in the commissary, the storeroom, the bathroom, the bedrooms. No one in the lightroom. No one on the roof.

No one in the lighthouse but Perrin.

He returned to the commissary, brewed a pot of coffee, sat half an hour listening to the sigh of water across the shelf, then went to his bunk.

Passing Seguilo's room he looked in. The bunk was empty.

When at last he rose in the morning, his mouth was dry, his muscles like bundles of withes, his eyes hot from long staring up at the ceiling. He rinsed his face with cold water and, going to the window, searched the horizon. A curtain of dingy overcast hung halfway up the east; blue-green

Magda shone through like an ancient coin covered with verdigris. Over the water oily skeins of blue-green light formed and joined and broke and melted... Out along the south horizon Perrin spied a pair of black hyphens – barges riding the Trade Current to Spacetown. After a few moments they disappeared into the overcast.

Perrin threw the master switch; above him came the fluttering hum of the lumenifer slowing and dimming.

He descended the stairs, with stiff fingers unbolted the door, flung it wide. The wind blew past his ears, smelling of Maurnilam Var. The tide was low; Isel Rock rose out of the water like a saddle. He walked gingerly to the water's edge. Blue-green Magda broke clear of the overcast; the light struck under the water. Leaning precariously over the shelf, Perrin looked down, past shadows and ledges and grottos, down into the gloom... Movement of some kind; Perrin strained to see. His foot slipped, he almost fell.

Perrin returned to the lighthouse, worked a disconsolate three hours at the transceiver, finally deciding that some vital component had been destroyed.

He opened a lunch unit, pulled a chair to the window, sat gazing across the ocean. Eleven weeks to the relief ship. Isel Rock had been lonely enough with Seguilo.

Blue-green Magda sank in the west. A sulfur overcast drifted up to meet it. Sunset brought a few minutes of sad glory to the sky: jade-colored stain with violet streakings. Perrin started the twin shafts of red and white on their nocturnal sweep, went to stand by the window.

The tide was rising, the water surged over the shelf with a heavy sound. Up from the west floated a moon; Ista, Bista, Liad, Miad, or Poidel? A native would know at a glance. Up they came, one after the other, five balls blue as old ice.

'It's not wise to believe...' What had Seguilo meant? Perrin tried to think back. Seguilo had said, 'It's not often, very rare, in fact, that the five moons bunch up – but when they do, then there're high tides.' He had hesitated, glancing out at the shelf. 'When the five moons rise together,' said Seguilo, 'it's not wise to believe anything.'

Perrin had gazed at him with forehead creased in puzzle-

ment. Seguilo was an old hand, who knew the fables and lore, which he brought forth from time to time. Perrin had never known quite what to expect from Seguilo; he had the trait indispensable to a lighthouse-tender – taciturnity. The transceiver had been his hobby; in Perrin's ignorant hands, the instrument had destroyed itself. What the lighthouse needed, thought Perrin, was one of the new transceivers with self-contained power unit, master control, the new organic screen, soft and elastic, like a great eye... A sudden rain squall blanketed half the sky; the five moons hurtled toward the cloud bank. The tide surged high over the shelf, almost over a gray mass. Perrin eyed it with interest; what could it be? ... About the size of a transceiver, about the same shape. Of course, it could not possibly *be* a transceiver; yet, what a wonderful thing if it were... He squinted, strained his eyes. There, surely, that was the milk-colored screen; those black spots were dials. He sprang to his feet, ran down the stairs, out the door, across the rock... It was irrational; why should a transceiver appear just when he wanted it, as if in answer to his prayer? Of course it might be part of a cargo lost overboard...

Sure enough, the mechanism was bolted to a raft of Manasco logs, and evidently had floated up on the shelf on the high tide.

Perrin, unable to credit his good fortune, crouched beside the gray case. Brand new, with red seals across the master switch.

It was too heavy to carry. Perrin tore off the seals, threw on the power: here was a set he understood. The screen glowed bright.

Perrin dialed to the Commission band. The interior of an office appeared and facing out was, not the officious subordinate, but Superintendent Raymond Flint himself. Nothing could be better.

'Superintendent,' cried out Perrin, 'this is Isel Rock Lighthouse, Harold Perrin speaking.'

'Oh, yes,' said Superintendent Flint. 'How are you, Perrin? What's the trouble?'

'My partner, Andy Seguilo, disappeared – vanished into nowhere; I'm alone out here.'

Superintendent Flint looked shocked. 'Disappeared? What happened? Did he fall into the ocean?'

'I don't know. He just disappeared. It happened last night—'

'You should have called in before,' said Flint reprovingly. 'I would have sent out a rescue copter to search for him.'

'I tried to call,' Perrin explained, 'but I couldn't get the regular transceiver to work. It burnt up on me... I thought I was marooned here.'

Superintendent Flint raised his eyebrows in mild curiosity. 'Just what are you using now?'

Perrin stammered, 'It's a brand new instrument... floated up out of the sea. Probably was lost from a barge.'

Flint nodded. 'Those bargemen are a careless lot – don't seem to understand what good equipment costs... Well, you sit tight. I'll order a plane out in the morning with a relief crew. You'll be assigned to duty along the Floral Coast. How does that suit you?'

'Very well, sir,' said Perrin. 'Very well indeed. I can't think of anything I'd like better... Isel Rock is beginning to get on my nerves.'

'When the five moons rise, it's not wise to believe anything,' said Superintendent Flint in a sepulchral voice.

The screen went dead.

Perrin lifted his hand, slowly turned off the power. A drop of rain fell on his face. He glanced skyward. The squall was almost on him. He tugged at the transceiver, although well aware that it was too heavy to move. In the storeroom was a tarpaulin that would protect the transceiver until morning. The relief crew could help him move it inside.

He ran back to the lighthouse, found the tarpaulin, hurried back outside. Where was the transceiver? ... Ah – there. He ran through the pelting drops, wrapped the tarpaulin around the box, lashed it into place, ran back to the lighthouse. He barred the door, and whistling, opened a canned dinner unit.

The rain spun and slashed at the lighthouse. The twin shafts of white and red swept wildly around the sky. Perrin climbed into his bunk, lay warm and drowsy... Seguilo's disappearance was a terrible thing; it would leave a scar on

his mind. But it was over and done with. Put it behind him; look to the future. The Floral Coast . . .

In the morning the sky was bare and clean. Maurnilam Var spread mirror-quiet as far as the eye could reach. Isel Rock lay naked to the sunlight. Looking out the window, Perrin saw a rumpled heap – the tarpaulin, the lashings. The transceiver, the Manasco raft had disappeared utterly.

Perrin sat in the doorway. The sun climbed the sky. A dozen times he jumped to his feet, listening for the sound of engines. But no relief plane appeared.

The sun reached the zenith, verged westward. A barge drifted by, a mile from the rock. Perrin ran out on the shelf, shouting, waving his arms.

The lank, red bargemen sprawled on the cargo stared curiously, made no move. The barge dwindled into the east.

Perrin returned to the doorstep, sat with his head in his hands. Chills and fever ran along his skin. There would be no relief plane. On Isel Rock he would remain, day in, day out, for eleven weeks.

Listlessly, he climbed the steps to the commissary. There was no lack of food, he would never starve. But could he bear the solitude, the uncertainty? Seguilo going, coming, going... The unsubstantial transceiver... Who was responsible for these cruel jokes? The five moons rising together – was there some connection?

He found an almanac, carried it to the table. At the top of each page five white circles on a black strip represented the moons. A week ago they strung out at random. Four days ago Liad, the slowest, and Poidel, the fastest, were thirty degrees apart, with Ista, Bista, and Miad between. Two nights ago the peripheries almost touched; last night they were even closer. Tonight Poidel would bulge slightly out in front of Ista, tomorrow night Liad would lag behind Bista... But between the five moons and Seguilo's disappearance – where was the connection?

Gloomily, Perrin ate his dinner. Magda settled into Maurnilam Var without display, a dull dusk settled over Isel Rock, water rose and sighed across the shelf.

Perrin turned on the light, barred the door. There would be no more hoping, no more wishing – no more believing. In

eleven weeks the relief ship would convey him back to Spacetown; in the meantime he must make the best of the situation.

Through the window he saw the blue glow in the east, watched Poidel, Ista, Bista, Liad, and Miad climb the sky. The tide came with the moons. Maurnilam Var was still calm, and each moon laid a separate path of reflection along the water.

Perrin looked up into the sky, around the horizon. A beautiful, lonesome sight. With Seguilo he sometimes had felt lonely, but never isolation such as this. Eleven weeks of solitude... If he could select a companion ... Perrin let his mind wander.

Into the moonlight a slim figure came walking, wearing tan breeches and a short-sleeved white sports shirt.

Perrin stared, unable to move. The figure walked up to the door, rapped. The muffled sound came up the staircase. 'Hello, anybody home?' It was a clear girl's voice.

Perrin swung open the window, called hoarsely, 'Go away!'

She moved back, turned up her face, and the moonlight fell upon her features. Perrin's voice died in his throat. He felt his heart beating wildly.

'Go away?' she said in a soft puzzled voice. 'I've no place to go.'

'Who are you?' he asked. His voice sounded strange to his own ears – desperate, hopeful. After all, she was possible – even though almost impossibly beautiful... She might have flown out from Spacetown. 'How did you get here?'

She gestured at Maurnilam Var. 'My plane went down about three miles out. I came over on the life raft.'

Perrin looked along the water's edge. The outline of a life raft was barely visible.

The girl called up, 'Are you going to let me in?'

Perrin stumbled downstairs. He halted at the door, one hand on the bolts, and the blood rushed in his ears.

An impatient tapping jarred his hand. 'I'm freezing to death out here.'

Perrin let the door swing back. She stood facing him,

half-smiling. 'You're a very cautious lighthouse-tender – or perhaps a woman-hater?'

Perrin searched her face, her eyes, the expression of her mouth. 'Are you . . . real?'

She laughed, not at all offended. 'Of course I'm real.' She held out her hand. 'Touch me.' Perrin stared at her – the essence of night-flowers, soft silk, hot blood, sweetness, delightful fire. 'Touch me,' she repeated softly.

Perrin moved back uncertainly, and she came forward, into the lighthouse. 'Can you call the shore?'

'No . . . my transceiver is out of order.'

She turned him a quick firefly look. 'When is your next relief boat?'

'Eleven weeks.'

'Eleven weeks!' she sighed a soft shallow sigh.

Perrin moved back another half-step. 'How did you know I was alone?'

She seemed confused. 'I didn't know. . . Aren't lighthouse-keepers always alone?'

'No.'

She came a step closer. 'You don't seem pleased to see me. Are you . . . a hermit?'

'No,' said Perrin in a husky voice. 'Quite the reverse. . . But I can't quite get used to you. You're a miracle. Too good to be true. Just now I was wishing for someone . . . exactly like you. Exactly.'

'And here I am.'

Perrin moved uneasily. 'What's your name?'

He knew what she would say before she spoke. 'Sue.'

'Sue what?' He tried to hold his mind vacant.

'Oh . . . just Sue. Isn't that enough?'

Perrin felt the skin of his face tighten. 'Where is your home?'

She looked vaguely over her shoulder. Perrin held his mind blank, but the word came through.

'Hell.'

Perrin's breath came hard and sharp.

'And what is Hell like?'

'It is . . . cold and dark.'

Perrin stepped back. 'Go away. Go away.' His vision

blurred; her face melted as if tears had come across his eyes.

'Where will I go?'

'Back where you came from.'

'But' – forlornly – 'there is nowhere but Maurnilam Var. And up here—' She stopped short, took a swift step forward, stood looking up into his face. He could feel the warmth of her body. 'Are you afraid of me?'

Perrin wrenched his eyes from her face. 'You're not real. You're something which takes the shape of my thoughts. Perhaps you killed Seguilo... I don't know what you are. But you're not real.'

'Not real? Of course I'm real. Touch me. Feel my arm.' Perrin backed away. She said passionately, 'Here, a knife. If you are of a mind, cut me; you will see blood. Cut deeper ... you will find bone.'

'What would happen,' said Perrin, 'if I drove the knife into your heart?'

She said nothing, staring at him with big eyes.

'Why do you come here?' cried Perrin. She looked away, back toward the water.

'It's magic ... darkness...' The words were a mumbled confusion; Perrin suddenly realized that the same words were in his own mind. Had she merely parroted his thoughts during the entire conversation? 'Then comes a slow pull,' she said. 'I drift, I crave the air, the moons bring me up... I do anything to hold my place in the air...'

'Speak your own words,' said Perrin harshly. 'I know you're not real – but where is Seguilo?'

'Seguilo?' She reached a hand behind her head, touched her hair, smiled sleepily at Perrin. Real or not, Perrin's pulse thudded in his ears. Real or not...

'I'm no dream,' she said. 'I'm real...' She came slowly toward Perrin, feeling his thoughts, face arch, ready.

Perrin said in a strangled gasp, 'No, no. Go away. *Go away!*'

She stopped short, looked at him through eyes suddenly opaque. 'Very well. I will go now—'

'Now! Forever!'

'—but perhaps you will call me back...'

She walked slowly through the door. Perrin ran to the

window, watched the slim shape blur into the moonlight. She went to the edge of the shelf; here she paused. Perrin felt a sudden intolerable pang; what was he casting away? Real or not, she was what he wanted her to be; she was identical to reality... He leaned forward to call, 'Come back ... whatever you are...' He restrained himself. When he looked again she was gone... Why was she gone? Perrin pondered, looking across the moonlit sea. He had wanted her, but he no longer believed in her. He had believed in the shape called Seguilo; he had believed in the transceiver – and both had slavishly obeyed his expectations. So had the girl, and he had sent her away... Rightly, too, he told himself regretfully. Who knows what she might become when his back was turned...

When dawn finally came, it brought a new curtain of overcast. Blue-green Magda glimmered dull and sultry as a moldy orange. The water shone like oil... Movement in the west – a Panapa chieftain's private barge, walking across the horizon like a water-spider. Perrin vaulted the stairs to the lightroom, swung the lumenifer full at the barge, dispatched an erratic series of flashes.

The barge moved on, jointed oars swinging rhythmically in and out of the water. A torn banner of fog drifted across the water. The barge became a dark, jerking shape, disappeared.

Perrin went to Seguilo's old transceiver, sat looking at it. He jumped to his feet, pulled the chassis out of the case, disassembled the entire circuit.

He saw scorched metal, wires fused into droplets, cracked ceramic. He pushed the tangle into a corner, went to stand by the window.

The sun was at the zenith, the sky was the color of green grapes. The sea heaved sluggishly, great amorphous swells rising and falling without apparent direction. Now was low tide; the shelf shouldered high up, the black rock showing naked and strange. The sea palpitated, up, down, up, down, sucking noisily at bits of sea-wrack.

Perrin descended the stairs. On his way down he looked in at the bathroom mirror, and his face stared back at him, pale, wide-eyed, cheeks hollow and lusterless. Perrin con-

tinued down the stairs, stepped out into the sunlight.

Carefully he walked out on the shelf, looked in a kind of fascination down over the edge. The heave of the swells distorted his vision; he could see little more than shadows and shifting fingers of light.

Step by step he wandered along the shelf. The sun leaned to the west. Perrin retreated up the rock.

At the lighthouse he seated himself in the doorway. Tonight the door remained barred. No inducement could persuade him to open up; the most entrancing visions would beseech him in vain. His thoughts went to Seguilo. What had Seguilo believed; what being had he fabricated out of his morbid fancy with the power and malice to drag him away? ... It seemed that every man was victim to his own imaginings. Isel Rock was not the place for a fanciful man when the five moons rose together.

Tonight he would bar the door, he would bed himself down and sleep, secure both in the barrier of welded metal and his own unconsciousness.

The sun sank in a bank of heavy vapor. North, east, south flushed with violet; the west glowed lime and dark green, dulling quickly through tones of brown. Perrin entered the lighthouse, bolted the door, set the twin shafts of red and white circling the horizon.

He opened a dinner unit, ate listlessly. Outside was dark night, emptiness to all the horizons. As the tide rose, the water hissed and moaned across the shelf.

Perrin lay in his bed, but sleep was far away. Through the window came an electric glow, then up rose the five moons, shining through a high overcast as if wrapped in blue gauze.

Perrin heaved fitfully. There was nothing to fear, he was safe in the lighthouse. No human hands could force the door: it would take the strength of a mastodon, the talons of a rock choundril, the ferocity of a Maldene land-shark...

He elbowed himself up on his bunk... A sound from outside? He peered through the window, heart in his mouth. A tall shape, indistinct. As he watched it, it slouched toward the lighthouse – as he knew it would.

'No, no,' cried Perrin softly. He flung himself into his

bunk, covered his head in the blankets. 'It's only what I think up myself, it's not real... Go away,' he whispered fiercely. 'Go away.' He listened. It must be near the door now. It would be lifting a heavy arm, the talons would glint in the moonlight.

'No, no,' cried Perrin. 'There's nothing there...' He held up his head and listened.

A rattle, a rasp at the door. A thud as a great mass tested the lock.

'Go away!' screamed Perrin. 'You're not real!'

The door groaned, the bolts sagged.

Perrin stood at the head of the stairs, breathing heavily through his mouth. The door would slam back in another instant. He knew what he would see: a black shape tall and round as a pole, with eyes like coach-lamps. Perrin even knew the last sound his ears would hear – a terrible grinding discord...

The top bolt snapped, the door reeled. A huge black arm shoved inside. Perrin saw the talons gleam as the fingers reached for the bolt.

His eyes flickered around the lighthouse for a weapon... Only a wrench, a tableknife.

The bottom bolt shattered, the door twisted. Perrin stood staring, his mind congealed. A thought rose up from some hidden survival-node. Here, Perrin thought, was the single chance.

He ran back into his room. Behind him the door clattered, he heard heavy steps. He looked around the room. His shoe.

Thud! Up the stairs, and the lighthouse vibrated. Perrin's fancy explored the horrible, he knew what he would hear. And so came a voice – harsh, empty, but like another voice which had been sweet. 'I told you I'd be back.'

Thud – thud – up the stairs. Perrin took the shoe by the toe, swung, struck the side of his head.

Perrin recovered consciousness. He stumbled to the wall, supported himself. Presently he groped to his bunk, sat down.

Outside there was still dark night. Grunting, he looked out the window into the sky. The five moons hung far down

in the west. Already Poidel ranged ahead, while Liad trailed behind.

Tomorrow night the five moons would rise apart.

Tomorrow night there would be no high tides, sucking and tremulous along the shelf.

Tomorrow night the moons would call up no yearning shapes from the streaming dark.

Eleven weeks to relief. Perrin gingerly felt the side of his head... Quite a respectable lump.

Noise

I

Captain Hess placed a notebook on the desk and hauled a chair up under his sturdy buttocks. Pointing to the notebook, he said, 'That's the property of your man Evans. He left it aboard the ship.'

Galispell asked in faint surprise, 'There was nothing else? No letter?'

'No, sir, not a thing. That notebook was all he had when we picked him up.'

Galispell rubbed his fingers along the scarred fibers of the cover. 'Understandable, I suppose.' He flipped back the cover. 'Hmmmm.'

Hess asked tentatively, 'What's been your opinion of Evans? Rather a strange chap?'

'Howard Evans? No, not at all. He's been a very valuable man to us. Why do you ask?'

Hess frowned, searching for the precise picture of Evans's behavior. 'I considered him erratic, or maybe emotional.'

Galispell was genuinely startled. 'Howard Evans?'

Hess's eyes went to the notebook. 'I took the liberty of looking through his log, and . . . well—'

'And you took the impression he was . . . strange.'

'Maybe everything he writes is true,' said Hess stubbornly. 'But I've been poking into odd corners of space all my life and I've never seen anything like it.'

'Peculiar situation,' said Galispell in a neutral voice. He looked into the notebook.

II

Journal of Howard Charles Evans

I commence this journal without pessimism but certainly without optimism. I feel as if I have already died once. My time in the lifeboat was at least a foretaste of death. I flew on and on through the dark, and a coffin could be only slightly more cramped. The stars were above, below, ahead, astern. I have no clock, and I can put no duration to my drifting. It was more than a week, it was less than a year.

So much for space, the lifeboat, the stars. There are not too many pages in this journal. I will need them all to chronicle my life on this world which, rising up under me, gave me life.

There is much to tell and many ways in the telling. There is myself, my own response to this rather dramatic situation. But lacking the knack for tracing the contortions of my psyche, I will try to detail events as objectively as possible.

I landed the lifeboat on as favorable a spot as I had opportunity to select. I tested the atmosphere, temperature, pressure, and biology; then I ventured outside. I rigged an antenna and dispatched my first SOS.

Shelter is no problem; the lifeboat serves me as a bed, and, if necessary, a refuge. From sheer boredom later on I may fell a few of these trees and build a house. But I will wait; there is no urgency.

A stream of pure water trickles past the lifeboat; I have abundant concentrated food. As soon as the hydroponic tanks begin to produce, there will be fresh fruits and vegetables and yeast proteins.

Survival seems no particular problem.

The sun is a ball of dark crimson, and casts hardly more light than the full moon of Earth. The lifeboat rests on a meadow of thick black-green creeper, very pleasant underfoot. A hundred yards distant in the direction I shall call south lies a lake of inky water, and the meadow slopes

smoothly down to the water's edge. Tall sprays of rather pallid vegetation – I had best use the word 'trees' – bound the meadow on either side.

Behind is a hillside, which possibly continues into a range of mountains; I can't be sure. This dim red light makes vision uncertain after the first few hundred feet.

The total effect is one of haunted desolation and peace. I would enjoy the beauty of the situation if it were not for the uncertainties of the future.

The breeze drifts across the lake, smelling pleasantly fragrant, and it carries a whisper of sound from off the waves. I have assembled the hydroponic tanks and set out cultures of yeast. I shall never starve or die of thirst. The lake is smooth and inviting; perhaps in time I will build a little boat. The water is warm, but I dare not swim. What could be more terrible than to be seized from below and dragged under?

There is probably no basis for my misgivings. I have seen no animal life of any kind: no birds, fish, insects, crustacea. The world is one of absolute quiet, except for the whispering breeze.

The scarlet sun hangs in the sky, remaining in place during many of my sleeps. I see it is slowly westering; after this long day how long and how monotonous will be the night!

I have sent off four SOS sequences; somewhere a monitor station must catch them.

A machete is my only weapon, and I have been reluctant to venture far from the lifeboat. Today (if I may use the word) I took my courage in my hands and started around the lake. The trees are rather like birches, tall and supple. I think the bark and leaves would shine a clear silver in light other than this wine-colored gloom. Along the lakeshore they stand in a line, almost as if long ago they had been planted by a wandering gardener. The tall branches sway in the breeze, glinting scarlet with purple overtones, a strange and wonderful picture which I am alone to see.

I have heard it said that enjoyment of beauty is magnified in the presence of others: that a mysterious rapport comes into play to reveal subtleties which a single mind is unable

to grasp. Certainly as I walked along the avenue of trees with the lake and the scarlet sun behind, I would have been grateful for companionship – but I believe that something of peace, the sense of walking in an ancient, abandoned garden, would be lost.

The lake is shaped like an hourglass; at the narrow waist I could look across and see the squat shape of the lifeboat. I sat down under a bush, which continually nodded red and black flowers in front of me.

Moist fibrils drifted across the lake and the wind made low musical sounds.

I rose to my feet, continued around the lake.

I passed through forests and glades and came once more to my lifeboat.

I went to tend my hydroponic tanks, and I think the yeast had been disturbed, prodded at curiously.

The dark red sun is sinking. Every day – it must be clear that I use 'day' as the interval between my sleeps – finds it lower in the sky. Night is almost upon me, long night. How shall I spend my time in the dark?

I have no gauge other than my mind, but the breeze seems colder. It brings long, mournful chords to my ears, very sad, very sweet. Mist-wraiths go fleeting across the meadow.

Wan stars already show themselves, ghost-lamps without significance.

I have been considering the slope behind my meadow; tomorrow I think I will make the ascent.

I have plotted the position of every article I possess. I will be gone some hours; if a visitor meddles with my goods – I will know his presence for certain.

The sun is low, the air pinches at my cheeks. I must hurry if I wish to return while light still shows me the landscape. I picture myself lost; I see myself wandering the face of this world, groping for my precious lifeboat, my tanks, my meadow.

Anxiety, curiosity, obstinacy all spurring me, I set off up the slope at a half-trot.

Becoming winded almost at once, I slowed my pace. The turf of the lakeshore had disappeared; I was walking on bare

rock and lichen. Below me the meadow became a patch, my lifeboat a gleaming spindle. I watched for a moment. Nothing stirred anywhere in my range of vision.

I continued up the slope and finally breasted the ridge. A vast valley fell off below me. Far away a range of great mountains stood into the dark sky. The wine-colored light slanting in from the west lit the prominences, the frontal bluffs, left the valleys in gloom: an alternate sequence of red and black beginning far in the west, continuing past, far to the east.

I looked down behind me, down to my own meadow, and was hard put to find it in the fading light. There it was, and there the lake, a sprawling hourglass. Beyond was dark forest, then a strip of old rose savanna, then a dark strip of woodland, then laminae of colorings to the horizon.

The sun touched the edge of the mountains, and with what seemed almost a sudden lurch, fell half below the horizon. I turned downslope; a terrible thing to be lost in the dark. My eye fell upon a white object, a hundred yards along the ridge. I walked nearer. Gradually it assumed form: a thimble, a cone, a pyramid – a cairn of white rocks.

A cairn, certainly. I stood looking down on it.

I turned, looked over my shoulder. Nothing in view. I looked down to the meadow. Swift shapes? I strained through the gathering murk. Nothing.

I tore at the cairn, threw rocks aside. What was below?

Nothing.

In the ground a faintly marked rectangle three feet long was perceptible. I stood back. No power I knew of could induce me to dig into that soil.

The sun was disappearing. Already at the south and north the afterglow began, lees of wine: the sun moved with astounding rapidity; what manner of sun was this, dawdling at the meridian, plunging below the horizon?

I turned downslope, but darkness came faster. The scarlet sun was gone; in the west was the sad sketch of departed flame. I stumbled, I fell. I looked into the east. A marvelous zodiacal light was forming, a strengthening blue triangle.

I watched, from my hands and knees. A cusp of bright blue lifted into the sky. A moment later a flood of sapphire

washed the landscape. A new sun of intense indigo rose into the sky.

The world was the same and yet different; where my eyes had been accustomed to red and the red subcolors, now I saw the intricate cycle of blue.

When I returned to my meadow the breeze carried a new sound: bright chords that my mind could almost form into melody. For a moment I so amused myself, and thought to see dance-motion in the wisps of vapor which for the last few days had been noticeable over my meadow.

In what I will call a peculiar frame of mind I crawled into the lifeboat and went to sleep.

I crawled out of the lifeboat into an electric world. I listened. Surely that was music – faint whispers drifting in on the wind like a fragrance.

I went down to the lake, as blue as a ball of that cobalt dye so aptly known as bluing.

The music became louder; I could catch snatches of melody – sprightly, quick-step phrases. I put my hands to my ears; if I were experiencing hallucinations, the music would continue. The sound diminished, but did not fade entirely; my test was not definitive. But I felt sure it was real. And where music was there must be musicians... I ran forward, shouted, 'Hello!'

'Hello!' came the echo from across the lake.

The music faded a moment, as a cricket chorus quiets when disturbed, then gradually I could hear it again – distant music, 'horns of elf-land faintly blowing.'

It went completely out of perception. I was left standing in the blue light, alone on my meadow.

I washed my face, returned to the lifeboat, sent out another set of SOS signals.

Possibly the blue day is shorter than the red day; with no clock I can't be sure. But with my new fascination in the music and its source, the blue day seems to pass swifter.

Never have I caught sight of the musicians. Is the sound

generated by the trees, by diaphanous insects crouching out of my vision?

One day I glanced across the lake, and – wonder of wonders! – a gay town spread along the opposite shore. After a first dumbfounded gaze, I ran down to the water's edge, stared as if it were the most precious sight of my life.

Pale silk swayed and rippled: pavilions, tents, fantastic edifices... Who inhabited these places? I waded knee-deep into the lake, and thought to see flitting shapes.

I ran like a madman around the shore. Plants with pale blue blossoms succumbed to my feet; I left the trail of an elephant through a patch of delicate reeds.

And when I came panting to the shore opposite my meadow, what was there? Nothing.

The city had vanished like a dream. I sat down on a rock. Music came clear for an instant, as if a door had momentarily opened.

I jumped to my feet. Nothing to be seen. I looked back across the lake. There – on my meadow – a host of gauzy shapes moved like May flies over a still pond.

When I returned, my meadow was vacant. The shore across the lake was bare.

So goes the blue day; and now there is amazement to my life. Whence comes the music? Who and what are these flitting shapes, never quite real but never entirely out of mind? Four times an hour I press a hand to my forehead, fearing the symptoms of a mind turning in on itself... If music actually exists on this world, actually vibrates the air, why should it come to my ears as Earth music? These chords I hear might be struck on familiar instruments; the harmonies are not at all alien... And these pale plasmic wisps that I forever seem to catch from the corner of my eye: the style is that of gay and playful humanity. The tempo of their movement is the tempo of the music.

So goes the blue day. Blue air, blue-black turf, ultramarine water, and the bright blue star bent to the west... How long have I lived on this planet? I have broadcast the SOS sequence until now the batteries hiss with exhaustion; soon there will be an end to power. Food, water are no prob-

lem to me, but what use is a lifetime of exile on a world of blue and red?

The blue day is at its close. I would like to mount the slope and watch the blue sun's passing – but the remembrance of the red sunset still provokes a queasiness in my stomach. So I will watch from my meadow, and then, if there is darkness, I will crawl into the lifeboat like a bear into a cave, and wait the coming of light.

The blue day goes. The sapphire sun wanders into the western forest, the sky glooms to blue-black, the stars show like unfamiliar home-places.

For some time now I have heard no music; perhaps it has been so all-present that I neglect it.

The blue star is gone, the air chills. I think that deep night is on me indeed... I hear a throb of sound, I turn my head. The east glows pale pearl. A silver globe floats up into the night: a great ball six times the diameter of Earth's full moon. Is this a sun, a satellite, a burnt-out star? What a freak of cosmology I have chanced upon.

The silver sun – I must call it a sun, although it casts a cool satin light – moves in an aureole like an oyster shell. Once again the color of the planet changes. The lake glistens like quicksilver, the trees are hammered metal... The silver star passes over a high wrack of clouds, and the music seems to burst forth as if somewhere someone flung wide curtains.

I wander down to the lake. Across on the opposite shore once more I see the town. It seems clearer, more substantial; I note details that shimmered away to vagueness before – a wide terrace beside the lake, spiral columns, a row of urns. The silhouette is, I think, the same as when I saw it under the blue sun: silken tents; shimmering, reflecting cusps of light; pillars of carved stone, lucent as milk-glass; fantastic fixtures of no obvious purpose... Barges drift along the quicksilver lake like moths, great sails bellying, the rigging a mesh of cobweb. Nodules of light hang on the stays, along the masts... On sudden thought, I turn, look up to my own meadow. I see a row of booths as at an old-time fair, a circle of pale stone set in the turf, a host of filmy shapes.

Step by step I edge toward my lifeboat. The music waxes. I peer at one of the shapes, but the outlines waver. It moves to the emotion of the music – or does the motion of the shape generate the music?

I run forward, shouting. One of the shapes slips past me, and I look into a blur where a face might be. I come to a halt, panting hard; I stand on the marble circle. I stamp; it rings solid. I walk toward the booths, they seem to display complex things of pale cloth and dim metal – but as I look my eyes mist over as with tears. The music goes far, far away, my meadow lies bare and quiet. My feet press into silver-black turf; in the sky hangs the silver-black star.

I am sitting with my back to the lifeboat, staring across the lake, which is still as a mirror. I have arrived at a set of theories.

My primary proposition is that I am sane – a necessary article of faith; why bother even to speculate otherwise? So – events occurring outside my own mind cause everything I have seen and heard. But – note this! – these sights and sounds do not obey the laws of science; in many respects they seem particularly subjective.

It must be, I tell myself, that both objectivity and subjectivity enter into the situation. I receive impressions which my brain finds unfamiliar, and so translates to the concept most closely related. By this theory the inhabitants of this world are constantly close; I move unknowingly through their palaces and arcades; they dance incessantly around me. As my mind gains sensitivity, I verge upon rapport with their way of life and I see them. More exactly, I sense something which creates an image in the visual region of my brain. Their emotions, the pattern of their life sets up a kind of vibration which sounds in my brain as music... The reality of these creatures I am sure I will never know. They are diaphane, I am flesh; they live in a world of spirit, I plod the turf with my heavy feet.

These last days I have neglected to broadcast the SOS. Small lack; the batteries are about done.

The silver sun is at the zenith, and leans westward. What comes next? Back to the red sun? Or darkness? Certainly

this is no ordinary planetary system; the course of this world along its orbit must resemble one of the pre-Copernican epicycles.

I believe that my brain is gradually tuning into phase with this world, reaching a new high level of sensitivity. If my theory is correct, the *élan-vital* of the native beings expresses itself in my brain as music. On Earth we would perhaps use the word 'telepathy.' So I am practising, concentrating, opening my consciousness wide to these new perceptions. Ocean mariners know a trick of never looking directly at a far light lest it strike the eyes' blind spot. I am using a similar device of never staring directly at one of the gauzy beings. I allow the image to establish itself, build itself up, and by this technique they appear quite definitely human. I sometimes think I can glimpse the features. The women are like sylphs, achingly beautiful; the men – I have not seen one in detail, but their carriage, their form is familiar.

The music is always part of the background, just as rustling of leaves is part of a forest. The mood of these creatures seems to change with their sun, so I hear music to suit. The red sun gave them passionate melancholy, the blue sun merriment. Under the silver star they are delicate, imaginative, wistful.

The silver day is on the wane. Today I sat beside the lake with the trees a screen of filigree, watching the moth-barges drift back and forth. What is their function? Can life such as this be translated in terms of economics, ecology, sociology? I doubt it. The word intelligence may not even enter the picture; is not our brain a peculiarly anthropoid characteristic, and is not intelligence a function of our peculiarly anthropoid brain? ... A portly barge sways near, with swamp-globes in the rigging, and I forget my hypotheses. I can never know the truth, and it is perfectly possible that these creatures are no more aware of me than I originally was aware of them.

Time goes by; I return to the lifeboat. A young woman-shape whirls past. I pause, peer into her face; she tilts her head, her eyes burn into mine as she passes... I try an

SOS – listlessly, because I suspect the batteries to be dank and dead.

And indeed they are.

The silver star is like an enormous Christmas tree bauble, round and glistening. It floats low, and once more I stand irresolute, half expecting night.

The star falls; the forest receives it. The sky dulls, and night has come.

I face the east, my back pressed to the hull of my lifeboat. Nothing.

I have no conception of the passage of time. Darkness, timelessness. Somewhere clocks turn minute hands, second hands, hour hands – I stand staring into the night, perhaps as slow as a sandstone statue, perhaps as feverish as a salamander.

In the darkness there is a peculiar cessation of sound. The music has dwindled; down through a series of wistful chords, a forlorn last cry. . .

A glow in the east, a green glow, spreading. Up rises a magnificent green sphere, the essence of all green, the tincture of emeralds, deep as the sea.

A throb of sound; rhythmical, strong music, swinging and veering.

The green light floods the planet, and I prepare for the green day.

I am almost one with the natives. I wander among their pavilions, I pause by their booths to ponder their stuffs and wares: silken medallions, spangles and circlets of woven metal, cups of fluff and iridescent puff, puddles of color and wafts of light-shot gauze. There are chains of green glass; captive butterflies; spheres which seem to hold all the heavens, all the clouds, all the stars.

And to all sides of me go the flicker and flit of the dream-people. The men are all vague, but familiar; the women turn me smiles of ineffable provocation. But I will drive myself mad with temptations; what I see is no more than the formulation of my own brain, an interpretation. . . And this is tragedy, for there is one creature so unutterably lovely that whenever I see the shape that is she my throat aches

and I run forward, to peer into her eyes that are not eyes...

Today I clasped my arms around her, expecting yielding wisp. Surprisingly, there was the feel of supple flesh. I kissed her, cheek, chin, mouth. Such a look of perplexity on the face as I have never seen; heaven knows what strange act the creature thought me to be performing.

She went her way, but the music is strong and triumphant: the voice of cornets, the resonant bass below.

A man comes past; something in his stride, his posture, plucks at my memory. I step forward; I will gaze into his face, I will plumb the vagueness.

He whirls past like a figure on a carousel; he wears flapping ribbons of silk and pompoms of spangled satin. I pound after him, I plant myself in his path. He strides past with a side-glance, and I stare into the rigid face.

It is my own face.

He wears my face, he walks with my stride. He is I.

Already is the green day gone?

The green sun goes, and the music takes on depth. No cessation now; there is preparation, imminence... What is that other sound? A far spasm of something growling and clashing like a broken gear box.

It fades out.

The green sun goes down in a sky like a peacock's tail. The music is slow, exalted.

The west fades, the east glows. The music goes toward the east, to the great bands of rose, yellow, orange, lavender. Cloud-flecks burst into flame. A golden glow consumes the sky.

The music takes on volume. Up rises the new sun – a gorgeous golden ball. The music swells into a paean of light, fulfillment, regeneration... Hark! A second time the harsh sound grates across the music.

Into the sky, across the sun, drifts the shape of a spaceship. It hovers over my meadow, the landing jets come down like plumes.

The ship lands.

I hear the mutter of voices – men's voices.

The music is vanished; the marble carvings, the tinsel booths, the wonderful silken cities are gone.

III

Galispell rubbed his chin.

Captain Hess asked anxiously, 'What do you think of it?'

Galispell looked for a long moment out the window. 'What happened after you picked him up? Did you see any of these phenomena he talks about?'

'Not a thing.' Captain Hess shook his big round head. 'Sure, the system was a fantastic gaggle of dark stars and fluorescent planets and burnt-out old suns; maybe all these things played hob with his mind. He didn't seem too overjoyed to see us, that's a fact – just stood there, staring at us as if we were trespassers. "We got your SOS," I told him. "Jump aboard, wrap yourself around a good meal!" He came walking forward as if his feet were dead.

'Well, to make a long story short, he finally came aboard. We loaded on his lifeboat and took off.

'During the voyage back he had nothing to do with anybody – just kept to himself, walking up and down the promenade.

'He had a habit of putting his hands to his head; one time I asked him if he was sick, if he wanted the medic to look him over. He said no, there was nothing wrong with him. That's about all I know of the man.

'We made Sun, and came down toward Earth. Personally, I didn't see what happened because I was on the bridge, but this is what they tell me:

'As Earth got bigger and bigger Evans began to act more restless than usual, wincing and turning his head back and forth. When we were about a thousand miles out, he gave a kind of furious jump.

'"The noise!" he yelled. "The horrible *noise*!" And with that he ran astern, jumped into his lifeboat, cast off, and they tell me disappeared back the way we came.

'And that's all I got to tell you, Mr Galispell. It's too bad, after our taking all that trouble to get him, Evans decided to pull up stakes – but that's the way it goes.'

'He took off back along your course?'

'That's right. If you're wanting to ask, could he have made the planet where we found him, the answer is, not likely.'

'But there's a chance?'

'Oh, sure,' said Captain Hess. 'There's a chance.'

The New Prime

Music, carnival lights, the slide of feet on waxed oak, perfume, muffled talk and laughter.

Arthur Caversham of twentieth-century Boston felt air along his skin, and discovered himself to be stark naked.

It was at Janice Paget's coming-out party: three hundred guests in formal evening-wear surrounded him.

For a moment he felt no emotion beyond vague bewilderment. His presence seemed the outcome of logical events, but his memory was fogged and he could find no definite anchor of certainty.

He stood a little apart from the rest of the stag line, facing the red and gold calliope where the orchestra sat. The buffet, the punch bowl, the champagne wagons, tended by clowns, were to his right; to the left, through the open flap of the circus tent, lay the garden, now lit by strings of colored lights, red, green, yellow, blue, and he caught a glimpse of a merry-go-round across the lawn.

Why was he here? He had no recollection, no sense of purpose... The night was warm; the other young men in the full-dress suits must feel rather sticky, he thought... An idea tugged at a corner of his mind. There was a significant aspect of the affair that he was overlooking.

He noticed that the young men nearby had moved away from him. He heard chortles of amusement, astonished exclamations. A girl dancing past saw him over the arm of her escort; she gave a startled squeak, jerked her eyes away, giggling and blushing.

Something was wrong. These young men and women were startled and amazed by his naked skin to the point of embarrassment. The gnaw of urgency came closer to the surface. He must do something. Taboos felt with such intensity might not be violated without unpleasant conse-

quences; such was his understanding. He was lacking garments; these he must obtain.

He looked about him, inspecting the young men who watched him with ribald delight, disgust, or curiosity. To one of these latter he addressed himself.

'Where can I get some clothing?'

The young man shrugged. 'Where did you leave yours?'

Two heavyset men in dark blue uniforms entered the tent; Arthur Caversham saw them from the corner of his eye, and his mind worked with desperate intensity.

This young man seemed typical of those around him. What sort of appeal would have meaning for him? Like any other human being, he could be moved to action if the right chord were struck. By what method could he be moved?

Sympathy?

Threats?

The prospect of advantage or profit?

Caversham rejected all of these. By violating the taboo he had forfeited his claim to sympathy. A threat would excite derision, and he had no profit or advantage to offer. The stimulus must be more devious... He reflected that young men customarily banded together in secret societies. In the thousand cultures he had studied this was almost infallibly true. Long-houses, drug-cults, tongs, instruments of sexual initiation – whatever the name, the external aspects were near-identical: painful initiation, secret signs and passwords, uniformity of group conduct, obligation to service. If this young man were a member of such an association, he might react to an appeal to this group-spirit.

Arthur Caversham said, 'I've been put in this taboo situation by the brotherhood; in the name of the brotherhood, find me some suitable garments.'

The young man stared, taken aback. 'Brotherhood? ... You mean fraternity?' Enlightenment spread over his face. 'Is this some kind of hell-week stunt?' He laughed. 'If it is, they sure go all the way.'

'Yes,' said Arthur Caversham. 'My fraternity.'

The young man said, 'This way, then – and hurry, here comes the law. We'll take off under the tent. I'll lend you my topcoat till you make it back to your house.'

The two uniformed men, pushing quietly through the dancers, were almost upon them. The young man lifted the flap of the tent, Arthur Caversham ducked under, his friend followed. Together they ran through the many-colored shadows to a little booth painted with gay red and white stripes that was near the entrance to the tent.

'You stay back, out of sight,' said the young man. 'I'll check out my coat.'

'Fine,' said Arthur Caversham.

The young man hesitated. 'What's your house? Where do you go to school?'

Arthur Caversham desperately searched his mind for an answer. A single fact reached the surface.

'I'm from Boston.'

'Boston U? Or MIT? Or Harvard?'

'Harvard.'

'Ah.' The young man nodded. 'I'm Washington and Lee myself. What's your house?'

'I'm not supposed to say.'

'Oh,' said the young man, puzzled but satisfied. 'Well – just a minute...'

Bearwald the Halforn halted, numb with despair and exhaustion. The remnants of his platoon sank to the ground around him, and they stared back to where the rim of the night flickered and glowed with fire. Many villages, many wood-gabled farmhouses had been given the torch, and the Brands from Mount Medallion reveled in human blood.

The pulse of a distant drum touched Bearwald's skin, a deep *thrumm-thrumm-thrumm*, almost inaudible. Much closer he heard a hoarse human cry of fright, then exultant killing-calls, not human. The Brands were tall, black, man-shaped but not men. They had eyes like lamps of red glass, bright white teeth, and tonight they seemed bent on slaughtering all the men of the world.

'Down,' hissed Kanaw, his right arm-guard, and Bearwald crouched. Across the flaring sky marched a column of tall Brand warriors, rocking jauntily, without fear.

Bearwald said suddenly, 'Men – we are thirteen. Fighting arm to arm with these monsters we are helpless. Tonight

their total force is down from the mountain; the hive must be near deserted. What can we lose if we undertake to burn the home-hive of the Brands? Only our lives, and what are these now?'

Kanaw said, 'Our lives are nothing; let us be off at once.'

'May our vengeance be great,' said Broctan the left arm-guard. 'May the home-hive of the Brands be white ashes this coming morn...'

Mount Medallion loomed overhead; the oval hive lay in Pangborn Valley. At the mouth of the valley, Bearwald divided the platoon into two halves, and placed Kanaw in the van of the second. 'We move silently twenty yards apart; thus if either party rouses a Brand, the other may attack from the rear and so kill the monster before the vale is roused. Do all understand?'

'We understand.'

'Forward then, to the hive.'

The valley reeked with an odor like sour leather. From the direction of the hive came a muffled clanging. The ground was soft, covered with runner moss; careful feet made no sound. Crouching low, Bearwald could see the shapes of his men against the sky – here indigo with a violet rim. The angry glare of burning Echevasa lay down the slope to the south.

A sound. Bearwald hissed, and the columns froze. They waited. *Thud-thud-thud-thud* came the steps – then a hoarse cry of rage and alarm.

'Kill, kill the beast!' yelled Bearwald.

The Brand swung his club like a scythe, lifting one man, carrying the body around with the after-swing. Bearwald leapt close, struck with his blade, slicing as he hewed; he felt the tendons part, smelled the hot gush of Brand blood.

The clanging had stopped now, and Brand cries carried across the night.

'Forward,' panted Bearwald. 'Out with your tinder, strike fire to the hive. Burn, burn, burn...'

Abandoning stealth he ran forward; ahead loomed the dark dome. Immature Brands came surging forth, squeaking and squalling, and with them came the genetrices – twenty-

foot monsters, crawling on hands and feet, grunting and snapping as they moved.

'Kill!' yelled Bearwald the Halforn. 'Kill! Fire, fire, fire!'

He dashed to the hive, crouched, struck spark to tinder, puffed. The rag, soaked with saltpeter, flared; Bearwald fed it straw, thrust it against the hive. The reed-pulp and withe crackled.

He leapt up as a horde of young Brands darted at him. His blade rose and fell; they were cleft, no match for his frenzy. Creeping close came the great Brand genetrices, three of them, swollen of abdomen, exuding an odor vile to his nostrils.

'Out with the fire!' yelled the first. 'Fire, out. The Great Mother is tombed within; she lies too fecund to move... Fire, woe, destruction!' And they wailed, 'Where are the mighty? Where are our warriors?'

Thrumm-thrumm-thrumm came the sound of skindrums. Up the valley rolled the echo of hoarse Brand voices.

Bearwald stood with his back to the blaze. He darted forward, severed the head of a creeping genetrice, jumped back... Where were his men? 'Kanaw!' he called. 'Laida! Theyat! Gyorg! Broctan!'

He craned his neck, saw the flicker of fires. 'Men! Kill the creeping mothers!' And leaping forward once more, he hacked and hewed, and another genetrix sighed and groaned and rolled flat.

The Brand voices changed to alarm; the triumphant drumming halted; the thud of footsteps came loud.

At Bearwald's back the hive burnt with a pleasant heat. Within came a shrill keening, a cry of vast pain.

In the leaping blaze he saw the charging Brand warriors. Their eyes glared like embers, their teeth shone like white sparks. They came forward, swinging their clubs, and Bearwald gripped his sword, too proud to flee.

After grounding his air sled Ceistan sat a few minutes inspecting the dead city Therlatch: a wall of earthen brick a hundred feet high, a dusty portal, and a few crumbled roofs lifting above the battlements. Behind the city the desert spread across the near, middle, and far distance to the

hazy shapes of the Allune Mountains at the horizon, pink in the light of the twin suns Mig and Pag.

Scouting from above he had seen no sign of life, nor had he expected any, after a thousand years of abandonment. Perhaps a few sand-crawlers wallowed in the heat of the ancient bazaar. Otherwise the streets would feel his presence with great surprise.

Jumping from the airsled, Ceistan advanced toward the portal. He passed under, stood looking right and left with interest. In the parched air the brick buildings stood almost eternal. The wind smoothed and rounded all harsh angles; the glass had been cracked by the heat of day and chill of night; heaps of sand clogged the passageways.

Three streets led away from the portal and Ceistan could find nothing to choose between them. Each was dusty, narrow, and each twisted out of his line of vision after a hundred yards.

Ceistan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Somewhere in the city lay a brassbound coffer, containing the Crown and Shield Parchment. This, according to tradition, set a precedent for the fiefholder's immunity from energy-tax. Glay, who was Ceistan's liege-lord, having cited the parchment as justification for his delinquency, had been challenged to show validity. Now he lay in prison on charge of rebellion, and in the morning he would be nailed to the bottom of an air sled and sent drifting into the west, unless Ceistan returned with the parchment.

After a thousand years, there was small cause for optimism, thought Ceistan. However, the lord Glay was a fair man and he would leave no stone unturned... If it existed, the chest presumably would lie in state, in the town's Legalic, or the Mosque, or in the Hall of Relics, or possibly in the Sumptuar. He would search all of these, allowing two hours per building; the eight hours so used would see the end to the pink daylight.

At random he entered the street in the center and shortly came to a plaza at whose far end rose the Legalic, the Hall of Records and Decisions. At the façade Ceistan paused, for the interior was dim and gloomy. No sound came from the

dusty void save the sigh and whisper of the dry wind. He entered.

The great hall was empty. The walls were illuminated with frescoes of red and blue, as bright as if painted yesterday. There were six to each wall, the top half displaying a criminal act and the bottom half the penalty.

Ceistan passed through the hall, into the chambers behind. He found but dust and the smell of dust. Into the crypts he ventured, and these were lit by embrasures. There was much litter and rubble, but no brass coffer.

Up and out into the clean air he went, and strode across the plaza to the Mosque, where he entered under the massive architrave.

The Nunciator's Confirmatory lay wide and bare and clean, for the tessellated floor was swept by a powerful draft. A thousand apertures opened from the low ceiling, each communicating with a cell overhead; thus arranged so that the devout might seek counsel with the Nunciator as he passed below without disturbing their attitudes of supplication. In the center of the pavilion a disk of glass roofed a recess. Below was a coffer and in the coffer rested a brass-bound chest. Ceistan sprang down the steps in high hopes.

But the chest contained jewels – the tiara of the Old Queen, the chest vellopes of the Gonwand Corps, the great ball, half emerald, half ruby, which in the ancient ages was rolled across the plaza to signify the passage of the old year.

Ceistan tumbled them all back in the coffer. Relics on this planet of dead cities had no value, and synthetic gems were infinitely superior in luminosity and water.

Leaving the Mosque, he studied the height of the suns. The zenith was past, the moving balls of pink fire leaned to the west. He hesitated, frowning and blinking at the hot earthen walls, considering that not impossibly both coffer and parchment were fable, like so many others regarding dead Therlatch.

A gust of wind swirled across the plaza and Ceistan choked on a dry throat. He spat, and an acrid taste bit his tongue. An old fountain opened in the wall nearby; he ex-

amined it wistfully, but water was not even a memory along these dead streets.

Once again he cleared his throat, spat, turned across the city toward the Hall of Relics.

He entered the great nave, past square pillars built of earthen brick. Pink shafts of light struck down from the cracks and gaps in the roof, and he was like a midge in the vast space. To all sides were niches cased in glass, and each held an object of ancient reverence: the armor in which Plange the Forewarned led the Blue Flags; the coronet of the First Serpent; an array of antique Padang skulls; Princess Thermosteraliam's bridal gown of woven cobweb palladium, as fresh as the day she wore it; the original Tablets of Legality; the great conch throne of an early dynasty; a dozen other objects. But the coffer was not among them.

Ceistan sought for entrance to a possible crypt, but except where the currents of dusty air had channeled grooves in the porphyry, the floor was smooth.

Out once more into the dead streets, and now the suns had passed behind the crumbled roofs, leaving the streets in magenta shadow.

With leaden feet, burning throat, and a sense of defeat, Ceistan turned to the Sumptuar, on the citadel. Up the wide steps, under the verdigris-fronted portico into a lobby painted with vivid frescoes. These depicted the maidens of ancient Therlatch at work, at play, amid sorrow and joy: slim creatures with short, black hair and glowing ivory skin, as graceful as water vanes, as round and delectable as chermoyan plums. Ceistan passed through the lobby with many side-glances, reflecting that these ancient creatures of delight were now the dust he trod under his feet.

He walked down a corridor which made a circuit of the building, and from which the chambers and apartments of the Sumptuar might be entered. The wisps of a wonderful rug crunched under his feet, and the walls displayed moldy tatters, once tapestries of the finest weave. At the entrance to each chamber a fresco pictured the Sumptuar maiden and the sign she served; at each of these chambers Ceistan paused, made a quick investigation, and so passed on to the next. The beams slanting in through the cracks served him

as a gauge of time, and they flattened ever more toward the horizontal.

Chamber after chamber after chamber. There were chests in some, altars in others, cases of manifestos, triptychs, and fonts in others. But never the chest he sought.

And ahead was the lobby where he had entered the building. Three more chambers were to be searched, then the light would be gone.

He came to the first of these, and this was hung with a new curtain. Pushing it aside, he found himself looking into an outside court, full in the long light of the twin suns. A fountain of water trickled down across steps of apple-green jade into a garden as soft and fresh and green as any in the north. And rising in alarm from a couch was a maiden, as vivid and delightful as any in the frescoes. She had short, dark hair, a face as pure and delicate as the great white frangipani she wore over her ear.

For an instant Ceistan and the maiden stared eye to eye; then her alarm faded and she smiled shyly.

'Who are you?' Ceistan asked in wonder. 'Are you a ghost or do you live here in the dust?'

'I am real,' she said. 'My home is to the south, at the Palram Oasis, and this is the period of solitude to which all maidens of the race submit when aspiring for Upper Instruction... So without fear may you come beside me, and rest, and drink of fruit wine and be my companion through the lonely night, for this is my last week of solitude and I am weary of my aloneness.'

Ceistan took a step forward, then hesitated. 'I must fulfill my mission. I seek the brass coffer containing the Crown and Shield Parchment. Do you know of this?'

She shook her head. 'It is nowhere in the Sumptuar.' She rose to her feet, stretching her ivory arms as a kitten stretches. 'Abandon your search, and come let me refresh you.'

Ceistan looked at her, looked up at the fading light, looked down the corridor to the two doors yet remaining. 'First I must complete my search; I owe duty to my lord Glay, who will be nailed under an air sled and sped west unless I bring him aid.'

The maiden said with a pout, 'Go then to your dusty chamber; and go with a dry throat. You will find nothing, and if you persist so stubbornly, I will be gone when you return.'

'So let it be,' said Ceistan.

He turned away, marched down the corridor. The first chamber was bare and dry as a bone. In the second and last, a man's skeleton lay tumbled in a corner; this Ceistan saw in the last rosy light of the twin suns.

There was no brass coffer, no parchment. So Glay must die, and Ceistan's heart hung heavy.

He returned to the chamber where he had found the maiden, but she had departed. The fountain had been stopped, and moisture only filmed the stones.

Ceistan called, 'Maiden, where are you? Return; my obligation is at an end...'

There was no response.

Ceistan shrugged, turned to the lobby and so outdoors, to grope his way through the deserted twilight street to the portal and his air sled.

Dobnor Daksat became aware that the big man in the embroidered black coat was speaking to him.

Orienting himself to his surroundings, which were at once familiar and strange, he also became aware that the man's voice was condescending, supercilious.

'You are competing in a highly advanced classification,' he said. 'I marvel at your ... ah, confidence.' And he eyed Daksat with a gleaming and speculative eye.

Daksat looked down at the floor, frowned at the sight of his clothes. He wore a long cloak of black-purple velvet, swinging like a bell around his ankles. His trousers were of scarlet corduroy, tight at the waist, thigh, and calf, with a loose puff of green cloth between calf and ankle. The clothes were his own, obviously: they looked wrong and right at once, as did the carved gold knuckle-guards he wore on his hands.

The big man in the dark cloak continued speaking, looking at a point over Daksat's head, as if Daksat were non-existent.

'Clauktaba has won Imagist honors over the years. Bel-Washab was the Korsi Victor last month; Tol Morabait is an acknowledged master of the technique. And then there is Ghisel Ghang of West Ind, who knows no peer in the creation of fire-stars, and Pulakt Havjorska, the Champion of the Island Realm. So it becomes a matter of skepticism whether you, new, inexperienced, without a fund of images, can do more than embarrass us all with your mental poverty.'

Daksat's brain was yet wrestling with his bewilderment, and he could feel no strong resentment at the big man's evident contempt. He said, 'Just what is all this? I'm not sure that I understand my position.'

The man in the black cloak inspected him quizzically. 'So, now you commence to experience trepidation? Justly, I assure you.' He sighed, waved his hands. 'Well, well – young men will be impetuous, and perhaps you have formed images you considered not discreditable. In any event, the public eye will ignore you for the glories of Clauktaba's geometrics and Ghisel Ghang's star-bursts. Indeed, I counsel you, keep your images small, drab, and confined; you will so avoid the faults of bombast and discord. . . Now, it is time to go to your Imagicon. This way, then. Remember, grays, browns, lavenders, perhaps a few tones of ocher and rust; then the spectators will understand that you compete for the schooling alone, and do not actively challenge the masters. This way then. . .'

He opened a door and led Dobnor Daksat up a stair and so out into the night.

They stood in a great stadium, facing six great screens forty feet high. Behind them in the dark sat tier upon tier of spectators – thousands and thousands, and their sounds came as a soft crush. Daksat turned to see them, but all their faces and their individualities had melted into the entity as a whole.

'Here,' said the big man, 'this is your apparatus. Seat yourself and I will adjust the ceretemps.'

Daksat suffered himself to be placed on a heavy chair, so soft and deep that he felt himself to be floating. Adjustments were made at his head and neck and the bridge of his nose.

He felt a sharp prick, a pressure, a throb, and then a soothing warmth. From the distance, a voice called out over the crowd:

'Two minutes to gray mist! Two minutes to gray mist! Attend, Imagists, two minutes to gray mist!'

The big man stooped over him. 'Can you see well?'

Daksat raised himself a trifle. 'Yes ... all is clear.'

'Very well. At "gray mist", this little filament will glow. When it dies, then it is your screen, and you must imagine your best.'

The far voice said, 'One minute to gray mist! The order is Pulakt Havjorska, Tol Morabait, Ghisel Ghang, Dobnor Daksat, Clauktaba, and Bel-Washab. There are no handicaps; all colors and shapes are permitted. Relax then, ready your lobes, and now – gray mist!'

The light glowed on the panel of Daksat's chair, and he saw five of the six screens light to a pleasant pearl-gray, swirling a trifle as if agitated, excited. Only the screen before him remained dull. The big man, who stood behind him, reached down, prodded. 'Gray mist, Daksat; are you deaf and blind?'

Daksat thought gray mist, and instantly his screen sprang to life, displaying a cloud of silver-gray, clean and clear.

'Humph,' he heard the big man snort. 'Somewhat dull and without interest – but I suppose good enough... See how Clauktaba's rings with hints of passion already, quivers with emotion.'

And Daksat, noting the screen to his right, saw this to be true. The gray, without actually displaying color, flowed and filmed as if suppressing a vast flood of light.

Now, to the far left, on Pulakt Havjorska's screen, color glowed. It was a gambit image, modest and restrained – a green jewel dripping a rain of blue and silver drops which struck a black ground and disappeared in little orange explosions.

Then Tol Morabait's screen glowed: a black and white checkerboard with certain of the squares flashing suddenly green, red, blue, and yellow – warm, searching colors, pure as shafts from a rainbow. The image disappeared in a flush mingled of rose and blue.

Ghisel Ghang wrought a circle of yellow which quivered, brought forth a green halo, which in turn bulged giving rise to a larger band of brilliant black and white. In the centre formed a complex kaleidoscopic pattern. The pattern suddenly vanished in a brilliant flash of light; on the screen for an instant or two appeared the identical pattern in a complete new suit of colors. A ripple of sound from the spectators greeted this *tour de force*.

The light on Daksat's panel died. Behind him he felt a prod. 'Now.'

Daksat eyed the screen and his mind was blank of ideas. He ground his teeth. Anything. Anything. A picture ... he imagined a view across the meadowlands beside the River Melramy.

'Hm,' said the big man behind him. 'Pleasant. A pleasant fantasy, and rather original.'

Puzzled, Daksat examined the picture on the screen. So far as he could distinguish, it was an uninspired reproduction of a scene he knew well. Fantasy? Was that what was expected? Very well, he'd produce fantasy. He imagined the meadows glowing, molten, white-hot. The vegetation, the old cairns slumped into a viscous seethe. The surface smoothed, became a mirror which reflected the Copper Crags.

Behind him the big man grunted. 'A little heavy-handed, that last, and thereby you destroyed the charming effect of those unearthly colors and shapes...'

Daksat slumped back in his chair, frowning, eager for his turn to come again.

Meanwhile Clauktaba created a dainty white blossom with purple stamens on a green stalk. The petals wilted, the stamens discharged a cloud of swirling yellow pollen.

Then Bel-Washab, at the end of the line, painted his screen a luminous underwater green. It rippled, bulged, and a black irregular blot marred the surface. From the center of the blot seeped a trickle of hot gold that quickly meshed and veined the black blot.

Such was the first passage.

There was a pause of several seconds. 'Now,' breathed the voice behind Daksat, 'now the competition begins.'

On Pulakt Havjorska's screen appeared an angry sea of color: waves of red, green, blue, an ugly mottling. Dramatically, a yellow shape appeared at the lower right, vanquished the chaos. It spread over the screen, the center went lime-green. A black shape appeared split, bowed softly and easily to both sides. Then turning, the two shapes wandered into the background, twisting, bending with supple grace. Far down a perspective they merged, darted forward like a lance, spread out into a series of lances, formed a slanting pattern of slim black bars.

'Superb!' hissed the big man. 'The timing, so just, so exact!'

Tol Morabait replied with a fuscous brown field threaded with crimson lines and blots. Vertical green hatching formed at the left, strode across the screen to the right. The brown field pressed forward, bulged through the green bars, pressed hard, broke, and segments flitted forward to leave the screen. On the black background behind the green hatching, which now faded, lay a human brain, pink, pulsing. The brain sprouted six insectlike legs, scuttled crabwise back into the distance.

Ghisel Ghang brought forth one of his fire-bursts – a small pellet of bright blue exploding in all directions, the tips working and writhing through wonderful patterns in the five colors, blue, violet, white, purple, and light green.

Dobnor Daksat, rigid as a bar, sat with hands clenched and teeth grinding into teeth. Now! Was not his brain as excellent as those of the far lands? Now!

On the screen appeared a tree, conventionalized in greens and blues, and each leaf was a tongue of fire. From these fires wisps of smoke arose on high to form a cloud which worked and swirled, then emptied a cone of rain about the tree. The flames vanished and in their places appeared star-shaped white flowers. From the cloud came a bolt of lightning, shattering the tree to agonized fragments of glass. Another bolt into the brittle heap and the screen exploded in a great gout of white, orange, and black.

The voice of the big man said doubtfully, 'On the whole, well done, but mind my warning, and create more modest images, since—'

'Silence!' said Dobnor Daksat in a harsh voice.

So the competition went, round after round of spectacles, some sweet as canmel honey, others as violent as the storms that circle the poles. Color strove with color, patterns evolved and changed, sometimes in glorious cadence, sometimes in the bitter discord necessary to the strength of the image.

And Daksat built dream after dream, while his tension vanished, and he forgot all save the racing pictures in his mind and on the screen, and his images became as complex and subtle as those of the masters.

'One more passage,' said the big man behind Daksat, and now the imagists brought forth the master-dreams: Pulakt Havjorska, the growth and decay of a beautiful city; Tol Morabait, a quiet composition of green and white interrupted by a marching army of insects who left a dirty wake, and who were joined in battle by men in painted leather armor and tall hats, armed with short swords and flails. The insects were destroyed and chased off the screen; the dead warriors became bones and faded to twinkling blue dust. Ghisel Ghang created three fire-bursts simultaneously, each different, a gorgeous display.

Daksat imagined a smooth pebble, magnified it to a block of marble, chipped it away to create the head of a beautiful maiden. For a moment she stared forth and varying emotions crossed her face – joy at her sudden existence, pensive thought, and at last fright. Her eyes turned milky opaque blue, the face changed to a laughing sardonic mask, black-cheeked with a fleering mouth. The head tilted, the mouth spat into the air. The head flattened into a black background, the drops of spittle shone like fire, became stars, constellations, and one of these expanded, became a planet with configurations dear to Daksat's heart. The planet hurtled off into darkness, the constellations faded. Dobnor Daksat relaxed. His last image. He sighed, exhausted.

The big man in the black cloak removed the harness in brittle silence. At last he asked, 'The planet you imagined in that last screening, was that a creation or a remembrance of actuality? It was none of our system here, and it rang with the clarity of truth.'

Dobnor Daksat stared at him, puzzled, and the words faltered in his throat. 'But it is – home! This world! Was it not this world?'

The big man looked at him strangely, shrugged, turned away. 'In a moment now the winner of the contest will be made known and the jeweled brevet awarded.'

The day was gusty and overcast, the galley was low and black, manned by the oarsmen of Belaclaw. Ergan stood on the poop, staring across the two miles of bitter sea to the coast of Racland, where he knew the sharp-faced Racs stood watching from the headlands.

A gout of water erupted a few hundred yards astern.

Ergan spoke to the helmsman. 'Their guns have better range than we bargained for. Better stand offshore another mile and we'll take our chances with the current.'

Even as he spoke, there came a great whistle and he glimpsed a black pointed projectile slanting down at him. It struck the waist of the galley, exploded. Timber, bodies, metal flew everywhere, and the galley laid its broken back into the water, doubled up and sank.

Ergan, jumping clear, discarded his sword, casque, and greaves almost as he hit the chill gray water. Gasping from the shock, he swam in circles, bobbing up and down in the chop; then, finding a length of timber, he clung to it for support.

From the shores of Racland a longboat put forth and approached, bow churning white foam as it rose and fell across the waves. Ergan turned loose the timber and swam as rapidly as possible from the wreck. Better drowning than capture; there would be more mercy from the famine-fish that swarmed the waters than from the pitiless Racs.

So he swam, but the current took him to the shore, and at last, struggling feebly, he was cast upon a pebbly beach.

Here he was discovered by a gang of Rac youths and marched to a nearby command post. He was tied and flung into a cart and so conveyed to the city Korsapan.

In a gray room he was seated facing an intelligence officer of the Rac secret police, a man with the gray skin of a toad, a moist gray mouth, eager, searching eyes.

'You are Ergan,' said the officer. 'Emissary to the Bargee of Salomdek. What was your mission?'

Ergan stared back eye to eye, hoping that a happy and convincing response would find his lips. None came, and the truth would incite an immediate invasion of both Belaclaw and Salomdek by the tall, thin-headed Rac soldiers, who wore black uniforms and black boots.

Ergan said nothing. The officer leaned forward. 'I ask you once more; then you will be taken to the room below.' He said 'Room Below' as if the words were capitalized, and he said it with soft relish.

Ergan, in a cold sweat, for he knew of the Rac torturers, said, 'I am not Ergan; my name is Ervard; I am an honest trader in pearls.'

'This is untrue,' said the Rac. 'Your aide was captured, and under the compression pump he blurted up your name with his lungs.'

'I am Ervard,' said Ergan, his bowels quaking.

The Rac signaled. 'Take him to the Room Below.'

A man's body, which has developed nerves as outposts against danger, seems especially intended for pain, and co-operates wonderfully with the craft of the torturer. These characteristics of the body had been studied by the Rac specialists, and other capabilities of the human nervous system had been blundered upon by accident. It had been found that certain programs of pressure, heat, strain, friction, torque, surge, jerk, sonic and visual shock, vermin, stench, and vileness created cumulative effects, whereas a single method, used to excess, lost its stimulation thereby.

All this lore and cleverness was lavished upon Ergan's citadel of nerves, and they inflicted upon him the entire gamut of pain: the sharp twinges, the dull, lasting joint-aches which groaned by night, the fiery flashes, the assaults of filth and lechery, together with shocks of occasional tenderness when he would be allowed to glimpse the world he had left.

Then back to the Room Below.

But always: 'I am Ervard the trader.' And always he tried to goad his mind over the tissue barrier to death, but

always the mind hesitated at the last toppling step, and Ergan lived.

The Racs tortured by routine, so that the expectation, the approach of the hour, brought as much torment as the act itself. And then the heavy, unhurried steps outside the cell, the feeble thrashing around to evade, the harsh laughs when they cornered him and carried him forth, and the harsh laughs when three hours later they threw him sobbing and whimpering back to the pile of straw that was his bed.

'I am Ervard,' he said, and trained his mind to believe that this was the truth, so that never would they catch him unaware. 'I am Ervard! I am Ervard, I trade in pearls!'

He tried to strangle himself on straw, but a slave watched always, and this was not permitted.

He attempted to die by self-suffocation, and would have been glad to succeed, but always as he sank into blessed numbness, so did his mind relax and his motor nerves take up the mindless business of breathing once more.

He ate nothing, but this meant little to the Racs, as they injected him full of tonics, sustaining drugs, and stimulants, so that he might always be keyed to the height of his awareness.

'I am Ervard,' said Ergan, and the Racs gritted their teeth angrily. The case was now a challenge; he defied their ingenuity, and they puzzled long and carefully upon refinements and delicacies, new shapes to the iron tools, new types of jerk ropes, new directions for the strains and pressures. Even when it was no longer important whether he was Ergan or Ervard, since war now raged, he was kept and maintained as a problem, an ideal case; so he was guarded and cosseted with even more than usual care, and the Rac torturers mulled over their techniques, making changes here, improvements there.

Then one day the Belaclaw galleys landed and the feather-crested soldiers fought past the walls of Korsapan.

The Racs surveyed Ergan with regret. 'Now we must go, and still you will not submit to us.'

'I am Ervard,' croaked that which lay on the table. 'Ervard the trader.'

A splintering crash sounded overhead.

'We must go,' said the Racs. 'Your people have stormed the city. If you tell the truth, you may live. If you lie, we kill you. So there is your choice. Your life for the truth.'

'The truth?' muttered Ergan. 'It is a trick—' And then he caught the victory chant of the Belaclaw soldiery. 'The truth? Why not? . . . Very well.' And he said, 'I am Ervard,' for now he believed this to be the truth.

Galactic Prime was a lean man with reddish-brown hair, sparse across a fine arch of skull. His face, undistinguished otherwise, was given power by great dark eyes flickering with a light like fire behind smoke. Physically, he had passed the peak of his youth; his arms and legs were thin and loose-jointed; his head inclined forward as if weighted by the intricate machinery of his brain.

Arising from the couch, smiling faintly, he looked across the arcade to the eleven Elders. They sat at a table of polished wood, backs to a wall festooned with vines. They were grave men, slow in their motions, and their faces were lined with wisdom and insight. By the ordained system, Prime was the executive of the universe, the Elders the deliberative body, invested with certain restrictive powers.

'Well?'

The Chief Elder without haste raised his eyes from the computer. 'You are the first to arise from the couch.'

Prime turned a glance up the arcade, still smiling faintly. The others lay variously: some with arms clenched, rigid as bars; others huddled in fetal postures. One had slumped from the couch half to the floor; his eyes were open, staring at remoteness.

Prime returned his gaze to the Chief Elder, who watched him with detached curiosity. 'Has the optimum been established?'

The Chief Elder consulted the computer. 'Twenty-six thirty-seven is the optimum score.'

Prime waited, but the Chief Elder said no more. Prime stepped to the alabaster balustrade beyond the couches. He leaned forward, looked out across the vista – miles and miles of sunny haze, with a twinkling sea in the distance. A breeze

blew past his face, ruffling the scant russet strands of his hair. He took a deep breath, flexed his fingers and hands, for the memory of the Rac torturers was still heavy on his mind. After a moment he swung around, leaned back, resting his elbows upon the balustrade. He glanced once more down the line of couches; there were still no signs of vitality from the candidates.

'Twenty-six thirty-seven,' he muttered. 'I venture to estimate my own score at twenty-five ninety. In the last episode I recall an incomplete retention of personality.'

'Twenty-five seventy-four,' said the Chief Elder. 'The computer judged Bearwald the Halforn's final defiance of the Brand warriors unprofitable.'

Prime considered. 'The point is well made. Obstinacy serves no purpose unless it advances a predetermined end. It is a flaw I must seek to temper.' He looked along the line of Elders, from face to face. 'You make no enunciations, you are curiously mute.'

He waited; the Chief Elder made no response.

'May I inquire the high score?'

'Twenty-five seventy-four.'

Prime nodded. 'Mine.'

'Yours is the high score,' said the Chief Elder.

Prime's smile disappeared: a puzzled line appeared across his brow. 'In spite of this, you are still reluctant to confirm my second span of authority; there are still doubts among you.'

'Doubts and misgivings,' replied the Chief Elder.

Prime's mouth pulled in at the corners, although his brows were still raised in polite inquiry. 'Your attitude puzzles me. My record is one of selfless service. My intelligence is phenomenal, and in this final test, which I designed to dispel your last doubts, I attained the highest score. I have proved my social intuition and flexibility, my leadership, devotion to duty, imagination, and resolution. In every commensurable aspect, I fulfill best the qualifications for the office I hold.'

The Chief Elder looked up and down the line of his fellows. There were none who wished to speak. The Chief Elder squared himself in his chair, sat back.

'Our attitude is difficult to represent. Everything is as you say. Your intelligence is beyond dispute, your character is exemplary, you have served your term with honor and devotion. You have earned our respect, admiration, and gratitude. We realize also that you seek this second term from praiseworthy motives: you regard yourself as the man best able to coordinate the complex business of the galaxy.'

Prime nodded grimly. 'But you think otherwise.'

'Our position is perhaps not quite so blunt.'

'Precisely what is your position?' Prime gestured along the couches. 'Look at these men. They are the finest of the galaxy. One man is dead. That one stirring on the third couch has lost his mind; he is a lunatic. The others are sorely shaken. And never forget that this test has been expressly designed to measure the qualities essential to the Galactic Prime.'

'This test has been of great interest to us,' said the Chief Elder mildly. 'It has considerably affected our thinking.'

Prime hesitated, plumbing the unspoken overtones of the words. He came forward, seated himself across from the line of Elders. With a narrow glance he searched the faces of the eleven men, tapped once, twice, three times with his fingertips on the polished wood, leaned back in the chair.

'As I have pointed out, the test has gauged each candidate for the exact qualities essential to the optimum conduct of office, in this fashion: Earth of the twentieth century is a planet of intricate conventions; on Earth the candidate, as Arthur Caversham, is required to use his social intuition – a quality highly important in this galaxy of two billion suns. On Belotsi, Bearwald the Halforn is tested for courage and the ability to conduct positive action. At the dead city Therlatch on Praesepe Three, the candidate, as Ceistan, is rated for devotion to duty, and as Dobnor Daksat at the Imagicon on Staff, his creative conceptions are rated against the most fertile imaginations alive. Finally as Ergan, on Chankozar, his will, persistence, and ultimate fiber are explored to their extreme limits.

'Each candidate is placed in the identical set of circumstances by a trick of temporal, dimensional, and cerebroneural meshing, which is rather complicated for the present

discussion. Sufficient that each candidate is objectively rated by his achievements, and that the results are commensurable.'

He paused, looked shrewdly along the line of grave faces. 'I must emphasize that although I myself designed and arranged the test, I thereby gained no advantage. The mnemonic synapses are entirely disengaged from incident to incident, and only the candidate's basic personality acts. All were tested under precisely the same conditions. In my opinion the scores registered by the computer indicate an objective and reliable index of the candidate's ability for the highly responsible office of Galactic Executive.'

The Chief Elder said, 'The scores are indeed significant.'

'Then – you approve my candidacy?'

The Chief Elder smiled. 'Not so fast. Admittedly you are intelligent, admittedly you have accomplished much during your term as Prime. But much remains to be done.'

'Do you suggest that another man would have achieved more?'

The Chief Elder shrugged. 'I have no conceivable way of knowing. I point out your achievements, such as the Glenart civilization, the Dawn Time on Masilis, the reign of King Karal on Aevir, the suppression of the Arkid Revolt. There are many such examples. But there are also shortcomings: the totalitarian governments on Earth, the savagery on Belotsi and Chankozar, so pointedly emphasized in your test. Then there is the decadence of the planets in the Eleven Hundred Ninth Cluster, the rise of the priest-kings on Fiir, and much else.'

Prime clenched his mouth and the fires behind his eyes burnt more brightly.

The Chief Elder continued. 'One of the most remarkable phenomena of the galaxy is the tendency of humanity to absorb and manifest the personality of the Prime. There seems to be a tremendous resonance which vibrates from the brain of the Prime through the minds of man from Center to the outer fringes. It is a matter which should be studied, analyzed, and subjected to control. The effect is as if every thought of the Prime is magnified a billion-fold, as if every mood sets the tone for a thousand civilizations,

every facet of his personality reflects in the ethics of a thousand cultures.'

Prime said tonelessly, 'I have remarked this phenomenon and have thought much on it. Prime's commands are promulgated in such a way as to exert subtle rather than overt influence; perhaps here is the background of the matter. In any event, the fact of this influence is even more reason to select for the office a man of demonstrated virtue.'

'Well put,' said the Chief Elder. 'Your character is indeed beyond reproach. However, we of the Elders are concerned by the rising tide of authoritarianism among the planets of the galaxy. We suspect that this principle of resonance is at work. You are a man of intense and indomitable will, and we feel that your influence has unwittingly prompted an irruption of autarchies.'

Prime was silent a moment. He looked down the line of couches where the other candidates were recovering awareness. They were men of various races: a pale Northkin of Palast, a stocky red Hawolo, a gray-haired gray-eyed Islander from the Sea Planet – each the outstanding man of the planet of his birth. Those who had returned to consciousness sat quietly, collecting their wits, or lay back on the couch, trying to expunge the test from their minds. There had been a toll taken: one lay dead, another bereft of his wits crouched whimpering beside his couch.

The Chief Elder said, 'The objectionable aspects of your character are perhaps best exemplified by the test itself.'

Prime opened his mouth; the Chief Elder held up his hand. 'Let me speak; I will try to deal fairly with you. When I am done, you may say your say.

'I repeat that your basic direction is displayed by the details of the test that you devised. The qualities you measured were those which you considered the most important: that is, those ideals by which you guide your own life. This arrangement I am sure was completely unconscious, and hence completely revealing. You conceive the essential characteristics of the Prime to be social intuition, aggressiveness, loyalty, imagination, and dogged persistence. As a man of strong character you seek to exemplify these ideals in your own conduct; therefore it is not at all surprising that in

this test, designed by you, with a scoring system calibrated by you, your score should be highest.

'Let me clarify the idea by an analogy. If the Eagle were conducting a test to determine the King of Beasts, he would rate all the candidates on their ability to fly; necessarily he would win. In this fashion the Mole would consider ability to dig important; by his system of testing *he* would inevitably emerge King of Beasts.'

Prime laughed sharply, ran a hand through his sparse red-brown locks. 'I am neither Eagle nor Mole.'

The Chief Elder shook his head. 'No. You are zealous, dutiful, imaginative, indefatigable – so you have demonstrated, as much by specifying tests for these characteristics as by scoring high in the same tests. But conversely, by the very absence of other tests you demonstrate deficiencies in your character.'

'And these are? '

'Sympathy. Compassion. Kindness.' The Chief Elder settled back in his chair. 'Strange. Your predecessor two times removed was rich in these qualities. During his term, the great humanitarian systems based on the idea of human brotherhood sprang up across the universe. Another example of resonance – but I digress.'

Prime said with a sardonic twitch of his mouth, 'May I ask this: have you selected the next Galactic Prime?'

The Chief Elder nodded. 'A definite choice has been made.'

'What was his score in the test?'

'By your scoring system – seventeen eighty. He did poorly as Arthur Caversham; he tried to explain the advantages of nudity to the policeman. He lacked the ability to concoct an instant subterfuge; he has little of your quick craft. As Arthur Caversham he found himself naked. He is sincere and straightforward, hence tried to expound the positive motivations for his state, rather than discover the means to evade the penalties.'

'Tell me more about this man,' said Prime shortly.

'As Bearwald the Halforn, he led his band to the hive of the Brands on Mount Medallion, but instead of burning the hive, he called forth to the queen, begging her to end the

useless slaughter. She reached out from the doorway, drew him within and killed him. He failed – but the computer still rated him highly on his forthright approach.

'At Therlatch, his conduct was as irreproachable as yours, and at the Imagicon his performance was adequate. Yours approached the brilliance of the Master Imagists, which is high achievement indeed.

'The Rac tortures are the most trying element of the test. You knew well you could resist limitless pain; therefore you ordained that all other candidates must likewise possess this attribute. The new Prime is sadly deficient here. He is sensitive, and the idea of one man intentionally inflicting pain upon another sickens him. I may add that none of the candidates achieved a perfect count in the last episode. Two others equaled your score—'

Prime evinced interest. 'Which are they?'

The Chief Elder pointed them out – a tall hard-muscled man with rock-hewn face standing by the alabaster balustrade gazing moodily out across the sunny distance, and a man of middle age who sat with his legs folded under him, watching a point three feet before him with an expression of imperturbable placidity.

'One is utterly obstinate and hard,' said the Chief Elder. 'He refused to say a single word. The other assumes an outer objectivity when unpleasantness overtakes him. Others among the candidates fared not so well; therapy will be necessary in almost all cases.'

Their eyes went to the witless creature with vacant eyes who padded up and down the aisle, humming and muttering quietly to himself.

'The tests were by no means valueless,' said the Chief Elder. 'We learned a great deal. By your system of scoring, the competition rated you most high. By other standards which we Elders postulated, your place was lower.'

With a tight mouth, Prime inquired, 'Who is this paragon of altruism, kindliness, sympathy, and generosity?'

The lunatic wandered close, fell on his hands and knees, crawled whimpering to the wall. He pressed his face to the cool stone, stared blankly up at Prime. His mouth hung

loose, his chin was wet, his eyes rolled apparently free of each other.

The Chief Elder smiled in great compassion; he stroked the mad creature's head. 'This is he. Here is the man we select.'

The old Galactic Prime sat silent, mouth compressed, eyes burning like far volcanoes.

At his feet the new Prime, Lord of Two Billion Suns, found a dead leaf, put it into his mouth and began to chew.

Guyal of Sfere

This is one of the tales from The Dying Earth. *The time is the remote future. The sun gutters like a candle in the wind. Misanthropic creatures wander the forests: grues, leucomorphs, deodands. The power of the magicians has waned; those still extant spend their energies in plots against each other. In ruins along the coasts of Ascolais and Almery a few languid men and women amuse themselves until that hour when the sun finally glimmers into darkness and the earth grows cold.*

Guyal of Sfere had been born one apart from his fellows and early proved a vexation for his sire. Normal in outward configuration, there existed within his mind a void which ached for nourishment. It was as if a spell had been cast upon his birth, a harassment visited on the child in a spirit of sardonic mockery, so that every occurrence, no matter how trifling, became a source of wonder. Even as young as four seasons he was expounding such inquiries as:

'Why do squares have more sides than triangles?'

'How will we see when the sun goes dark?'

'Do flowers grow under the ocean?'

'Do stars hiss and sizzle when rain comes by night?'

To which his impatient sire gave answers:

'So it was ordained by the Pragmatica; squares and triangles must obey the rote.'

'We will be forced to grope and feel our way.'

'I have not verified this matter; only the Curator would know.'

'Never. The stars are above the rain, higher even than the highest clouds, and swim in a rarified air where rain can never breed.'

As Guyal grew to youth, this void in his mind, instead of dwindling becoming sedimented with wax, throbbed with a more violent ache. And so he asked:

'Why do people die when they are killed?'

'Where does beauty vanish when it goes?'

'How long have men lived on Earth?'

'What is beyond the sky?'

To which his sire, biting acerbity back from his lips, would respond:

'Death is the heritage of life; a man's vitality is like air in a bladder. Poinct this bubble and away, away, away, flees life, like the color of fading dream.'

'Beauty is a luster which love bestows to guile the eye. Therefore it may be said that only when the brain is without love will the eye look and see no beauty.'

'Some say men germinated in the soil like grubs in a corpse; others aver that the first men desired residence and so created Earth by sorcery. The question is shrouded in technicality; only the Curator may answer with exactness.'

'An endless waste.'

Guyal pondered and postulated, proposed and expounded, until he found himself the subject of surreptitious humor. The demesne was visited by a rumor that a gleft, coming upon Guyal's mother in labor, had stolen part of Guyal's brain, which deficiency he now industriously sought to restore.

Guyal therefore drew himself apart and roamed the grassy hills of Sfere in solitude. But ever was his mind acquisitive, ever did he seek to exhaust the lore of all around him, until at last his father in vexation refused to hear further inquiries, declaring that all knowledge had been known, that the trivial and useless had been discarded, leaving only that residue necessary to a sound man.

At this time Guyal was in his first manhood, a slight but erect youth with wide clear eyes, a penchant for severely elegant dress, a firm somewhat compressed mouth.

Hearing his father's angry statement, Guyal said, 'One more question, then I ask no more.'

'Speak,' declared his father. 'One more question I grant you.'

'You have often referred me to the Curator; who is he, and where may I find him?'

A moment the father scrutinized the son whom he now considered past the verge of madness. Then he responded in a quiet voice, 'The Curator guards the Museum of Man, which antique legend places in the Land of the Falling Wall – beyond the mountains of Fer Aquila and north of Ascolais. It is not certain that either Curator or Museum still exist; still it would seem that if the Curator knows all things, as is the legend, then surely he would know the wizardly foil to death.'

Guyal said, 'I would seek the Curator and the Museum of Man, that I likewise may know all things.'

The father said with patience, 'I will bestow on you my fine white horse, my Expansible Egg for your shelter, my Scintillant Dagger to illuminate the night. In addition, I lay a blessing along the trail, and danger will slide you by so long as you never wander aside.'

Guyal quelled the hundred new questions at his tongue, including an inquisition as to where his father had learned these manifestations of sorcery, and accepted the gifts: the horse, the magic shelter, the dagger with the luminous pommel, and the blessing to guard him from the disadvantageous circumstances which plagued those who travelled the dim trails of Ascolais.

He caparisoned the horse, honed the dagger, cast a last glance around the old manse at Sfere, and set forth to the north.

He ferried the River Scaum on an old barge. Aboard the barge, and so off the trail, the blessing lost its cogency and in fact seemed to stimulate a counterinfluence, so that the barge-tender, who coveted Guyal's rich accoutrements, struck out suddenly with his cudgel. Guyal fended off the blow and tripped the man into the murky deep.

Mounting the north bank of the Scaum he saw ahead the Porphiron Scar, the dark poplars and white columns of Kaiin, the dull gleam of Sanreale Bay.

Wandering the crumbled streets, he put the languid in-

habitants such a spate of questions that one in wry jocularity commended him to a professional augur.

This, a lank hermetic with red-rimmed eyes and a stained white beard, dwelled in a booth painted with the Signs of the Aumoklopelastianic Cabal.

'What are your fees?' inquired Guyal cautiously.

'I respond to three questions,' stated the augur. 'For twenty terces I phrase the answer in clear and decisive language; for ten I use a professional cant, which occasionally admits of ambiguity; for five I speak a parable which you must interpret as you will; and for one terce I babble in an unknown tongue.'

'First I must inquire, how profound is your knowledge?'

'I know all,' responded the augur. 'The secrets of red and the secrets of black, the lost spells of Grand Motholam, the way of the fish and the voice of the bird.'

'And where have you learned all these things?'

'By pure induction,' explained the augur. 'I retire into my booth, I closet myself with never a glint of light and, so sequestered, I resolve the mysteries of the world.'

'Controlling such efficacy,' ventured Guyal, 'why do you live so meagerly, with not an ounce of fat to your frame and miserable rags to your back?'

The augur stood back in fury. 'Go along with you! Already I have wasted fifty terces of wisdom on you who have never a copper to your pouch. If you desire free enlightenment,' and he cackled in mirth, 'seek out the Curator.' He sheltered himself in his booth.

Guyal took lodging for the night, and in the morning went on his way. The trail made a wide detour around the haunted ruins of Old Town, then took to the fabulous forest.

For many a day Guyal rode toward the north. By night he surrounded himself and his horse in the Expansible Egg, a membrane impermeable to thew, claw, pressure, sound, and chill, and rested at ease despite the avid creatures of the dark.

The dull sun fell behind; the days grew wan and the nights bitter, and at last the crags of Fer Aquila showed as a tracing on the north horizon. In this region the forest was a scattering of phalurge and daobado; these last, massive construc-

tions of heavy bronze branches clumped with dark balls of foliage. Beside a giant of the species Guyal came upon a village of turf huts. A group of surly louts appeared and surrounded him with expressions of curiosity. Guyal, no less than the villagers, had questions to ask, but none would speak till the hetman strode up – a burly man in a shaggy fur hat, a cloak of brown fur, and a bristling beard, so that it was hard to see where one ended and the other began. He exuded a rancid odor which displeased Guyal, although from motives of courtesy, he took pains to keep his distaste concealed.

'Where go you?' asked the hetman.

'I wish to cross the mountains to the Museum of Man,' said Guyal. 'Which way does the trail lead?'

The hetman pointed out a notch on the silhouette of the mountains. 'There is Omona Gap, which is the shortest and best route, though there is no trail. None comes and none goes, since when you pass the Gap, you walk an unknown land. And with no traffic there manifestly need be no trail.'

The news did not cheer Guyal.

'How then is it known that Omona Gap is on the way to the Museum?'

The hetman shrugged. 'Such is our tradition.'

Guyal turned his head at a hoarse snuffling and saw a pen of woven wattles. In a litter of filth and matted straw stood a number of hulking men eight or nine feet tall. They were naked, with wax-colored faces, shocks of dirty yellow hair and watery blue eyes. As Guyal watched, one of them ambled to a trough and noisily began to gulp gray mash.

Guyal said, 'What manner of things are these?'

The hetman guffawed at Guyal's ignorance. 'They are oasts, naturally.' He indicated Guyal's white horse. 'Never have I seen a stranger oast than the one you bestride. Ours carry us more easily and appear to be less vicious; in addition, no flesh is more delicious than oast properly braised and kettled.'

Standing close he fondled the metal of Guyal's saddle and the red and yellow embroidered quilt. 'Your deckings however are rich and of superb quality. I will therefore bestow

you my large and weighty oast in return for this creature with its accoutrements.'

Guyal politely declared himself satisfied with his present mount, and the hetman shrugged his shoulders.

A horn sounded. The hetman looked about, then turned back to Guyal. 'Food is prepared; will you eat?'

Guyal glanced toward the oast-pen. 'I am not presently hungry, and I must hasten forward. However, I am grateful for your kindness.'

He departed; as he passed under the arch of the great daobado he turned a glance back toward the village. There seemed an unwonted activity among the huts. Remembering the hetman's covetous touch at his saddle, and aware that no longer did he ride the trail, Guyal urged his horse forward and pounded fast under the trees.

As he neared the foothills the forest dwindled to a savanna, floored with a dull, jointed grass that creaked under the horse's hooves. Guyal glanced up and down the plain. The sun wallowed in the southwest; the light across the plain was dim and watery. Another hour, then the dark night of the latter-day Earth. Guyal twisted in the saddle, looked behind him. Four oasts, carrying men on their shoulders, came trotting from the forest. Sighting Guyal they broke into a lumbering run. With a crawling skin Guyal wheeled his horse and eased the reins; the white horse loped across the plain toward Omona Gap. Behind ran the oasts, bestraddled by the fur-cloaked villagers.

The sun touched the horizon. Guyal looked back to his pursuers, bounding now a mile behind, then turned his gaze to the forest ahead. An ill place to ride by night, but where was his choice?

The foliage loomed above him; he passed under the first gnarled daobados. He changed directions, turned once, twice, a third time, then stood his horse to listen. Far away a crashing in the brake reached his ears. Guyal dismounted, led the horse into a deep hollow where a bank of foliage made a screen. Presently the four men on their hulking oasts passed across the afterglow, black double-shapes in attitudes suggestive of ill-temper and disappointment.

The thud and pad of feet dwindled and died.

The horse moved restlessly; the foliage rustled.

A damp air passed down the hollow and chilled the back of Guyal's neck. Darkness stood in the hollow like ink in a basin.

Guyal urged his horse up to the height and sat listening. Far down the wind he heard a hoarse call. Turning in the opposite direction he let the horse choose its own path.

Branches and boughs knit patterns on the fading sky; the air smelt of moss and mold. The horse stopped short. Guyal, tensing in every muscle, leaned a little forward. The air was still, uncanny; his eyes could plumb not ten feet into the black. Somewhere near was death – grinding death, to come as a sudden shock.

Sweating cold, afraid to stir a muscle, he forced himself to dismount. Stiffly he slid from the saddle, brought forth the Expansible Egg and flung it around his horse and himself. Safety. Guyal released the pressure of his breath.

Guyal of Sfere had lost his way in a land of wind and naked crags. As night came he slouched numbly in the saddle while his horse took him where it would. Somewhere the ancient way through Omona Gap led to the northern tundra, but now, under a chilly overcast, north, east, south, and west were alike.

The horse halted and Guyal found himself at the brink of a quiet valley. Guyal leaned forward, staring. Below spread a dark city. Mist blew along the streets; the afterglow fell dull on slate roofs.

The horse snorted and scraped the stony ground.

'A strange town,' said Guyal, 'with no lights, no sound, no smell of smoke... Doubtless an abandoned ruin from ancient times...'

He debated descending to the streets. At times the old ruins were haunted by peculiar distillations. On the other hand such a ruin might be joined to the tundra by a trail. With this thought in mind he started his horse down the slope.

He entered the town and the hooves rang loud and sharp on the cobbles. The buildings were stone and dark mortar and seemed in uncommonly good preservation. A few lin-

tels had cracked and sagged, a few walls gaped open, but for the most part the stone houses had successfully met the gnaw of time. . . Guyal scented smoke. Did people live here still? He would proceed with caution.

Before a building which seemed to be a hostelry flowers bloomed in an urn. Guyal reined his horse and reflected that flowers were rarely cherished by persons of hostile disposition.

'Hello!' he called – once, twice.

No heads peered from the doors, no orange flicker brightened the windows. Guyal slowly turned and rode on.

The street widened and twisted toward a large hall, where Guyal saw a light. The building had a high façade, broken by four large windows, each shielded by two blinds of corroded bronze filigree. A marble balustrade fronting the terrace shimmered bone-white behind, a portal of massive wood stood slightly ajar; from here came the beam of light and also a strain of music.

Guyal of Sfere, halting, gazed not at the house nor at the light through the door. He dismounted and bowed to the young woman who sat pensively along the course of the balustrade. Though it was very cold, she wore but a simple gown, yellow-orange, a daffodil's color. Topaz hair fell loose to her shoulders and gave her face a cast of gravity and thoughtfulness.

As Guyal straightened from his greeting, the woman nodded, smiling slightly, and absently fingered the hair by her cheek.

'A bitter night for travelers.'

'A bitter night for musing on the stars,' responded Guyal.

She smiled again. 'I am not cold. I sit and dream... I listen to the music.'

'What place is this?' inquired Guyal, looking up the street, down the street, and once more at the girl. 'Are there any here but yourself?'

'This is Carchasel,' said the girl, 'abandoned by all ten thousand years ago. Only I and my aged uncle live here, finding this place a refuge from the Saponids of the tundra.' She rose to her feet. 'But you are cold and weary,' said the

girl, 'and I keep you standing in the street. Our hospitality is yours.'

'Which I gladly accept,' said Guyal. 'First I must stable my horse.'

'He will be content in the house yonder. We have no stable.' She indicated a long stone building with a door opening into blackness.

Guyal took the white horse thither and removed the bridle and saddle; then, standing in the doorway, he listened to the music he had noted before, the piping of an ancient air.

'Strange,' he muttered, stroking the horse's muzzle. 'The uncle plays music, the girl stares alone at the stars of the night. . .' He considered a moment. 'I may be over-suspicious. If witch she be, there is naught to be gained from me. If they be simple refugees as she says, and lovers of music, they may enjoy the airs from Ascolais; it will repay, in some measure, their hospitality.' He reached into his saddlebag, brought forth his flute, and tucked it into his boot.

He returned to where the girl awaited him.

'You have not told me your name,' she reminded him, 'that I may introduce you to my uncle.'

'I am Guyal of Sfere, by the River Scaum in Ascolais. And you?'

She smiled, pushing the portal wider. Warm yellow light fell into the cobbled street.

'I have no name. I need none. There has never been any but my uncle; and when he speaks there is no one to answer but I.'

Guyal stared in astonishment; then, deeming his wonder too apparent for courtesy he controlled his expression. Perhaps she suspected him of wizardry and feared to pronounce her name lest he make magic with it.

They entered a flagged hall and the sound of piping grew louder.

'I will call you Ameth, if I may,' said Guyal. 'That is a flower of the south, as golden and kind as you seem to be.'

She nodded. 'You may call me Ameth.'

They entered a tapestry-hung chamber. A great fire glowed at one wall, and here stood a table bearing food. On

a bench sat the musician – an old man, untidy, unkempt. White hair hung tangled down his back; his beard, in no better case, was dirty and yellow. He wore a ragged kirtle, by no means clean, and the leather of his sandals had broken into dry cracks. Strangely, he did not take the flute from his mouth but kept up his piping; and the girl in yellow, so Guyal noted, seemed to move in rhythm to the tones.

'Uncle Ludowik,' she cried in a gay voice, 'I bring you a guest, Sir Guyal of Sfere.'

Guyal looked into the man's face and wondered. The eyes, though somewhat rheumy with age, were gray and intelligent and, so Guyal thought, bright with a strange joy, which further puzzled Guyal, for the lines of the face indicated nothing other than years of misery.

'Perhaps you play?' inquired Ameth. 'My uncle is a great musician, and this is his time for music. He has kept the routine for many years...' She turned and smiled at Ludowik the musician, who jerked his head and contrived an acquiescent grin, never taking the flute from his mouth.

Ameth motioned to the bounteous table. 'Eat, Guyal, and I will pour you wine. Afterwards perhaps you will play the flute for us.'

'Gladly,' said Guyal, and he noticed how the joy on Ludowik's face grew more apparent, quivering around the corners of his mouth.

He ate and Ameth poured him golden wine until his head went to reeling. And never did Ludowik cease his piping – a tender melody of running water, then a grave tune that told of the lost ocean to the west, then a simple melody such as a child might sing at his games. Guyal noted with wonder how Ameth fitted her mood to the music – grave and gay as the music led her. Strange! thought Guyal. But then – people thus isolated were apt to develop peculiar mannerisms, and they seemed kindly withal.

He finished his meal and stood erect, steadying himself against the table. Ludowik was lilting a melody of glass birds swinging round and round in the sunlight. Ameth came dancing over to him and stood close, so that he smelled the perfume of her loose golden hair. Her face was happy and wild... Peculiar how Ludowik watched so grimly, and yet

without a word. Perhaps he misdoubted a stranger's intent. Still . . .

'Now,' breathed Ameth, 'perhaps you will play the flute; you are strong and young.' Then she said, as she saw Guyal's eyes widen, 'I mean you will play on the flute for old Uncle Ludowik, and he will be happy and go off to bed – and then we will sit and talk far into the night.'

'Gladly will I play the flute,' said Guyal. 'I am accounted quite skillful at my home in Sfere.' Glancing at Ludowik, he surprised an expression of crazy gladness. Marvelous that a man should be so fond of music!

'Then – play!' breathed Ameth, urging him a little toward Ludowik and the flute.

'Perhaps,' suggested Guyal, 'I had better wait till your uncle pauses. I would seem discourteous—'

'No, as soon as you indicate that you wish to play, he will let off. Merely take the flute. You see,' she confided, 'he is rather deaf.'

'Very well,' said Guyal, 'except that I have my own flute.' And he brought it out from his boot. 'Why – what is the matter?' For a change had come over the girl and the old man. A quick light had risen in her eyes, and Ludowik's strange gladness had gone, and there was but dull hopelessness in his eyes, stupid resignation.

Guyal slowly stood back, bewildered. 'Do you not wish me to play?'

There was a pause. 'Of course,' said Ameth, young and charming once more. 'But I'm sure that Uncle Ludowik would enjoy hearing you play his flute. He is accustomed to the pitch; another scale might be unfamiliar. . .'

Ludowick nodded, and hope again shone in the rheumy old eyes. It was indeed a fine flute, Guyal saw, a rich piece of white metal, chased and set with gold, and Ludowik clutched this flute as if he would never let go.

'Take the flute,' suggested Ameth. 'He will not mind in the least.' Ludowik shook his head, to signify the absence of objection. But Guyal, noting with distaste the long, stained beard, also shook his head. 'I can play any scale, any tone on my flute. There is no need for me to use that of your uncle and possibly distress him. Listen,' and he raised

his instrument. 'Here is a song of Kaiin, called "The Opal, the Pearl, and the Peacock." '

He put the pipe to his lips and began to play, very skillfully indeed, and Ludowik followed him, filling in gaps, making chords. Ameth, forgetting her vexation, listened with eyes half closed, and moved her arm to the rhythm.

'Did you enjoy that?' asked Guyal when he had finished.

'Very much. Perhaps you would try it on Uncle Ludowik's flute? It is a fine flute to play, very soft and easy to the breath.'

'No,' said Guyal, with sudden obstinacy. 'I am able to play only my own instrument.' He blew again, and it was a dance of the festival, a quirking carnival air. Ludowik, playing with supernal skill, ran merry phrases as might fit, and Ameth, carried away by the rhythm, danced a dance of her own, a merry step in time to the music.

Guyal played a tarantella of the peasant folk, and Ameth danced wilder and faster, flung her arms, wheeled, jerked her head in a fine display. And Ludowik's flute played a brilliant obbligato, hurtling over, now under, chording, veering, warping little silver strings of sound around Guyal's melody, adding urgent little grace-phrases.

Ludowik's eyes now clung to the whirling figure of the dancing girl. And suddenly he struck up a theme of his own, a tune of wildest abandon, of a frenzied beating rhythm; and Guyal, carried away by the force of the music, blew as he never had blown before, invented trills and runs, gyrating arpeggios, blew high and shrill, loud and fast and clear.

It was as nothing to Ludowik's music. His eyes were starting; sweat streamed from his seamed old forehead; his flute tore the air into shreds.

Ameth danced frenzy; she was no longer beautiful, she appeared grotesque and unfamiliar. The music became something more than the senses could bear. Guyal's vision turned pink and gray; he saw Ameth fall in a faint, in a foaming fit; and Ludowik, fiery-eyed, staggered erect, hobbled to her body and began a terrible intense concord, slow measures of most solemn and frightening meaning.

Ludowik played death.

Guyal of Sfere turned and ran wide-eyed from the hall.

Ludowik, never noticing, continued his terrible piping, played as if every note were a skewer through the twitching girl's shoulder blades.

Guyal ran through the night and cold air bit at him like sleet. He burst into the shed, and the white horse nickered. On with the saddle, on with the bridle, away down the streets of old Carchasel, along the starlit cobbles, past the gaping black windows, away from the music of death!

Guyal of Sfere galloped up the mountain with the stars in his face, and not until he came to a shoulder did he turn in the saddle to look back.

The verging of dawn trembled into the stony valley. Where was Carchasel? There was no city, only a crumble of ruins...

Hark! A far sound?

No. All was silence.

And yet...

Only dark stones on the floor of the valley.

Guyal, fixed of eye, turned and went his way along the trail which stretched north before him.

The walls of the defile were gray granite, stained dull scarlet and black by lichen. The horse's hooves made a clop-clop-clop on the stone. After the sleepless night Guyal began to sag in the saddle. He resolved to round one more bend in the trail and then take rest.

The rock looming above hid the sky. The trail twisted around a shoulder of rock; ahead shone a patch of indigo. One more turning, Guyal told himself. The defile fell open, the mountains were at his back. He looked out across a hundred miles of steppe: a land shaded with subtle colors, fading and melting into the haze at the horizon. To the east he saw a lone eminence cloaked by a dark company of trees, the glisten of a lake at its foot. To the west a ranked mass of gray-white ruins was barely discernible. The Museum of Man? ... Guyal dismounted and sought sleep within the Expansible Egg.

The sun rolled in sad majesty behind the mountains; murk fell across the tundra. Guyal awoke and refreshed himself. He gave meal to his horse, ate dry fruit and bread;

then he mounted and rode down the trail. Gloom deepened; the plain sank from sight like a drowned land. Guyal reined his horse. Better, he thought, to ride in the morning. If he lost the trail in the dark, who could tell what he might encounter?

A mournful sound. Guyal turned his face to the sky. A sigh? A moan? ... Another sound, closer: the rustle of cloth. Guyal cringed into his saddle. Floating slowly across the darkness came a shape robed in white. Under the cowl and glowing with witch-light was a drawn face with eyes like the holes in a skull.

It breathed a sad sound and drifted away.

Guyal drew a shuddering breath and slumped against the pommel. Then he slipped to the ground and established the Egg about himself and his horse; presently, as he lay staring into the dark, sleep came on him and so the night passed.

He awoke before dawn and set forth. The trail was a ribbon of white sand between banks of gray furze; the miles passed swiftly.

As he neared the tree-shrouded hillock he saw roofs through the foliage and smoke rising into the sharp air. And presently to right and left spread fields of spikenard, callow, and mead-apple. Guyal continued with eyes watchful for men.

The trail passed beside a fence of stone and black timber enclosing a region of churned and scorched earth, which Guyal paused to examine. The horse started nervously; Guyal, turning, saw three men who had come quietly upon him: individuals tall and well-formed, somewhat solemn, with golden-ivory skin and jet-black hair. Their garments implied an ancient convention: tight suits of maroon leather trimmed with black lace and silver chain, maroon cloth hats crumpled in precise creases, with black leather flaps extended horizontally over each ear. Their attitudes expressed neither threat nor welcome. 'Greetings, stranger,' said one. 'Whither bound?'

'I go as fate directs,' replied Guyal cautiously. 'You are Saponids?'

'That is our race, though now we are few. Before you is

our final city, Issane.' He inspected Guyal with frank curiosity. 'And what of yourself?'

'I am Guyal of Sfere, which is in Ascolais, far to the south.'

The Saponids regarded Guyal with respect. 'You have come a long and perilous way.'

Guyal looked back at the mountains. 'Through the north forests and the wastes of Fer Aquila. At nightfall yesterday I passed through the mountains. In the dark a ghost hovered above till I thought the grave had marked me for its own.'

He paused in surprise; his words seemed to have released a powerful emotion in the Saponids. Their features lengthened, their mouths grew white. The spokesman, his polite detachment a trifle diminished, searched the sky. 'A ghost... In a white garment, floating on high?'

'Yes; is it a known familiar of the region?'

There was a pause.

'In a certain sense,' said the Saponid. 'It is a signal of woe... But I interrupt your tale.'

'There is little to tell. I took shelter for the night, and this morning I fared down to the plain.'

'Were you not molested further? By the Walking Serpent, who ranges the slopes like fate?'

'I saw neither walking serpent nor so much as a lizard; still, a blessing protects my trail and I come to no harm so long as I keep my course.'

'Interesting, interesting.'

'Now,' said Guyal, 'permit me to inquire of you, since there is much I would learn; what is this ghost, what event does he commemorate, and what are the portents?'

'You ask beyond my certain knowledge,' replied the Saponid cautiously. 'Of this ghost it is well not to speak lest our attention reinforce its malignity.'

'As you will,' replied Guyal. 'Perhaps—' He caught his tongue. Before inquiring for the Museum of Man it would be wise to learn in what regard the Saponids held it, lest learning his interest they should seek to deny him knowledge.

'Yes?' inquired the Saponids. 'What is your lack?'

Guyal indicated the seared area behind the fence of stone and timber. 'What is the cause of this devastation?'

The Saponid looked across the area with a blank expression.

'It is one of the ancient places; so much is known, no more. You will desire to rest and refresh yourself at Issane. Come; we will guide you.'

He turned down the trail; Guyal, finding neither words nor reasons to reject the idea, urged his horse forward.

The Saponids walked in silence; Guyal, though he seethed with a thousand questions, likewise held his tongue. They skirted a placid lake. The surface mirrored the sky, shoals of reeds, boats in the shape of sickles, with a bow and stern curving high from the water.

So they entered Issane: a town of no great pretense. The houses were hewn timber, golden brown, russet, weathered black. The construction was intricate and ornate, the walls rising three stories to steep gables. Pillars and piers were carved with complex designs: meshing ribbons, tendrils, leaves, lizards. The screens that guarded the windows were likewise carved, with foliage patterns, animal faces, radiant stars; rich textures in the mellow wood. Much effort, much expressiveness, had been expended on the carving.

They proceeded up a steep lane under the gloom cast by the trees, and the Saponids came forth to stare. They moved quietly and spoke in low voices, and their garments were of an elegance Guyal had not expected to see on the northern steppe.

One of the men turned to Guyal. 'Will you oblige us by waiting until the First Elder is informed, so that he may prepare a suitable reception?'

The request was framed in candid words and with guileless eyes. Guyal thought to perceive ambiguity in the phrasing, but since the hooves of his horse were planted in the center of the road, and since he did not propose leaving the road, Guyal assented with an open face. The Saponids disappeared and Guyal sat musing on the pleasant town perched so high above the plain.

A group of girls came to look at Guyal with curious eyes. Guyal returned the inspection, and sensed a lack about their persons, a discrepancy which he could not instantly identify. They wore graceful garments of woven wool,

striped and dyed various colors; they were supple and slender, and seemed not lacking in coquetry. And yet ...

The Saponid returned. 'Now, Sir Guyal, may we proceed?'

Guyal, endeavoring to remove any flavor of suspicion from his words, said, 'You will understand that by the very nature of my father's blessing I dare not leave the delineated trail; for then, instantly, I would become liable to any curse placed upon me along the way.'

The Saponid made an understanding gesture. 'Naturally; you follow a sound principle.'

Guyal bowed in gratification, and they continued up the road.

A hundred paces and the road leveled, crossing a common planted with small, fluttering, heart-shaped leaves, colored in all shades of purple, red, and black.

The Saponid turned to Guyal. 'As a stranger I must caution you never to set foot on the common. It is one of our sacred places, and tradition requires that a severe penalty be exacted for transgressions and sacrilege.'

'I note your warning,' said Guyal. 'I will respectfully obey your law.'

They passed a dense thicket; with hideous clamor a bestial shape sprang from concealment, a creature with tremendous fanged jaws. Guyal's horse shied, bolted, sprang out upon the sacred common and trampled the fluttering leaves.

A number of Saponid men rushed forth, grasped the horse, seized Guyal and dragged him from the saddle.

'Wait!' cried Guyal. 'What means this? Release me!'

The Saponid who had been his guide advanced, shaking his head in reproach. 'Indeed, and only had I just impressed upon you the gravity of such an offense!'

'But the monster frightened my horse!' said Guyal. 'I am nowise responsible for this trespass; release me, let us proceed to the reception.'

The Saponid said, 'I fear that the penalties prescribed by tradition must first come into effect. Your protests, though of superficial plausibility, will not sustain examination. For instance, the creature you term a monster is in reality a harmless domesticated beast. Secondly, I observe the animal you bestride; he will not make a turn or twist without the

twitch of the reins. Thirdly, even if your postulates were conceded, you thereby admit to guilt by virtue of negligence and omission. You should have secured a mount less apt to unpredictable action, or upon learning of the sanctitude of the common, you should have considered such a contingency as even now occurred, and therefore dismounted, leading your beast. Therefore, Sir Guyal, though loath, I am forced to believe you guilty of impertinence, impiety, disregard and impudicity. Therefore, as Castellan and Sergeant-Reader of the Litany, so responsible for the detention of law-breakers, I must order you secured, contained, pent, incarcerated and confined until such time as the penalties will be exacted.'

'The entire episode is mockery!' raged Guyal. 'Are you savages, then, thus to mistreat a lone wayfarer?'

'By no means,' replied the Castellan. 'We are a civilized people, with customs bequeathed us by the past. Since the past was more glorious than the present, we would show presumption by questioning these laws!'

Guyal fell quiet. 'And what are the usual penalties for my act?'

The Castellan made a reassuring motion. 'The rote prescribes three acts of penance, which in your case, I am sure will be nominal. But – the forms must be observed, and it is necessary that you be constrained in the Felon's Caseboard.' He motioned to the men who held Guyal's arm. 'Away with him, cross neither track nor trail, for then your grasp will be nerveless and he will be delivered from justice.'

Guyal was pent in a well aired but poorly lighted cellar of stone. The floor he found dry, the ceiling free of crawling insects. He had not been searched, nor had his Scintillant Dagger been removed from his sash. With suspicions crowding his brain he lay on the rush bed and, after a period, slept.

Now ensued the passing of a day. He was given food and drink; and at last the Castellan came to visit him.

'You are indeed fortunate,' said the Saponid, 'in that, as a witness, I was able to suggest your delinquencies to be more the result of negligence than malice. The last penalties

exacted for the crime were stringent; the felon was ordered to perform the following three acts: First, to cut off his toes and sew the severed members into the skin at his neck; second, to revile his forebears for three hours, commencing with a Common Bill of Anathema, including feigned madness and hereditary disease, and at last defiling the hearth of his clan; and third, walking a mile under the lake with leaded shoes in search of the Lost Book of Caraz.' And the Castellan regarded Guyal with complacency.

'What deeds must I perform?' inquired Guyal drily.

The Castellan joined the tips of his fingers together. 'As I say, the penances are nominal, by decree of the Elder. First, you must swear never again to repeat your crime.'

'That I gladly do,' said Guyal, and so bound himself.

'Second,' said the Castellan with a slight smile, 'you must adjudicate at a Grand Pageant of Pulchritude among the maids of the village and select her whom you consider the most beautiful.'

'Scarcely an arduous task,' commented Guyal. 'Why does it fall to my lot?'

The Castellan looked vaguely to the ceiling. 'There are a number of concomitants to victory in this contest... Every person in the town would find relations among the participants – a daughter, a sister, a niece – and so would hardly be considered unprejudiced. The charge of favoritism could never be leveled against you; therefore you make an ideal selection for this important post.'

Guyal seemed to hear the ring of sincerity in the Saponid's voice; still he wondered why the selection of the town's loveliest was a matter of such import.

'And third?' he inquired.

'That will be revealed after the contest, which occurs this afternoon.'

The Saponid departed the cell.

Guyal, who was not without vanity, spent several hours restoring himself and his costume from the ravages of travel. He bathed, trimmed his hair, shaved his face, and, when the Castellan came to unlock the door, he felt that he made no discreditable picture.

He was led out upon the road and directed up the hill

toward the summit of the terraced town of Saponce. Turning to the Castellan he said, 'How is it that you permit me to walk the trail once more? You must know that now I am safe from molestation...'

The Castellan shrugged. 'True. But you would gain little by insisting upon your temporary immunity. Ahead the trail crosses a bridge which we could demolish; behind we need but breach the dam to Green Torrent; then, should you walk the trail you would be swept to the side and so rendered vulnerable. No, Sir Guyal of Sfere, once the secret of your immunity is abroad then you are liable to a variety of stratagems. For instance, a large wall might be placed athwart the way, before and behind you. No doubt the spell would preserve you from thirst and hunger but what then? So would you sit till the sun went out.'

Guyal said no word. Across the lake he noticed a trio of the crescent boats approaching the docks, prows and sterns rocking and dipping into the shaded water with a graceful motion. The void in his mind made itself known. 'Why are your boats constructed in such fashion?'

The Castellan looked blankly at him. 'It is the only practicable method. Do not the oe-pods grow thusly to the south?'

'Never have I seen oe-pods.'

'They are the fruit of a great vine, and grow in scimitar-shape. When sufficiently large we cut and clean them, slit the inner edge, grapple end to end with strong line, and constrict till the pod opens as is desirable. When cured, dried, varnished, carved, burnished and lacquered, fitted with deck, thwarts and gussets – then have we our boats.'

They entered the plaza, a flat area at the summit surrounded on three sides by tall houses. To Guyal's surprise there seemed to be no preliminary ceremonies or formalities to the contest, and small spirit of festivity was manifest among the townspeople. Indeed they seemed beset by subdued despondency and eyed him without enthusiasm.

A hundred girls stood in a disconsolate group. It seemed to Guyal that they had gone to few pains to embellish themselves. To the contrary, they wore shapeless rags, their hair

seemed deliberately misarranged, their faces were dirty and scowling.

Guyal turned to his guide. 'The girls seem not to covet the garland of pulchritude.'

The Castellan nodded wryly. 'As you see, they are by no means jealous for distinction; modesty has always been a Saponid trait.'

Guyal hesitated. 'What is the form of procedure? I do not desire in my ignorance to violate another of your arcane regulations.'

The Castellan said with a blank face, 'There are no formalities. We conduct these pageants with expedition and the least possible ceremony. You need but pass among these maidens and point out her whom you deem the most attractive.'

Guyal advanced to his task, feeling more than half foolish. Then he reflected: this is a penalty for contravening an absurd tradition; I will conduct myself with efficiency and so the quicker rid myself of the obligation.

He stood before the hundred girls who eyed him with hostility and anxiety, and Guyal saw that his task would not be simple, since, on the whole, they were of a comeliness which even the dirt, grimacing, and rags could not disguise.

'Range yourselves, if you please, into a line,' said Guyal. 'In this way, none will be at disadvantage.'

Sullenly the girls formed a line.

Guyal surveyed the group. He saw at once that a number could be eliminated: the squat, the obese, the lean, the pocked and coarse-featured – perhaps a quarter of the group. He said suavely, 'Never have I seen such unanimous loveliness; each of you might legitimately claim the cordon. My task is arduous; I must weigh fine imponderables; in the end my choice will undoubtedly be based on subjectivity and those of real charm will no doubt be the first discharged from the competition.' He stepped forward. 'Those whom I indicate may retire.'

He walked down the line, pointing, and the ugliest, with expressions of unmistakable relief, hastened to the sidelines.

A second time Guyal made his inspection, and now,

somewhat more familiar with those he judged, he was able to discharge those who, while suffering no whit from ugliness, were merely plain.

Roughly a third of the original group remained. These stared at Guyal with varying degrees of apprehension and truculence as he passed before them, studying each in turn. . . All at once his mind was determined, and his choice definite.

Guyal made one last survey down the line. No, he had been accurate in his choice. There were girls here as comely as the senses could desire, girls with opal-glowing eyes and hyacinth features, girls as lissome as reeds, with hair silky and fine despite the dust which they seemed to have rubbed upon themselves.

The girl whom Guyal had selected was slighter than the others and possessed of a beauty not at once obvious. She had a small triangular face, great wistful eyes, and thick black hair cut short at the ears. Her skin was of a transparent paleness, like the finest ivory; her form slender, graceful, and of a compelling magnetism. She seemed to have sensed his decision and her eyes widened.

Guyal took her hand, led her forward, and turned to the Elder – an old man sitting stolidly in a heavy chair.

'This is she whom I find the loveliest among your maidens.'

There was silence through the square. Then there came a hoarse sound, a cry of sadness from the Castellan and Sergeant-Reader. He came forward, sagging of face, limp of body. 'Guyal of Sfere, you have wrought a great revenge for my tricking you. This is my beloved daughter, Shierl, whom you have designated.'

Guyal stammered, 'I meant but complete impersonality. Your daughter Shierl I find the loveliest creature of my experience; I cannot understand where I have offended.'

'No, Guyal,' said the Castellan, 'you have chosen fairly, for such indeed is my own thought.'

'Well, then,' said Guyal, 'reveal to me now my third task that I may finish, and then continue my pilgrimage.'

The Castellan said, 'Three leagues to the north lies the

ruin which tradition tells us to be the olden Museum of Man.'

'Ah,' said Guyal, 'go on, I attend.'

'You must, as your third charge, conduct my daughter Shierl to the Museum of Man. At the portal you will strike on a copper gong and announce to whoever responds: "We are those summoned from Issane."'

Guyal frowned. 'How is this? "We"?'

'Such is your charge,' said the Castellan in a voice like thunder.

Guyal looked to left, right, forward, and behind. But he stood in the center of the plaza surrounded by the hardy men of Issane.

'When must this charge be executed?' he inquired in a controlled voice.

The Castellan said in a voice bitter as gall: 'Even now Shierl goes to clothe herself in yellow. In one hour shall she appear; in one hour shall you set forth for the Museum of Man.'

'And then?'

'And then – for good or for evil, it is not known. You fare as thirteen thousand have fared before you.'

Down from the plaza, down the leafy lanes of Issane came Guyal, indignant and clamped of mouth, though the pit of his stomach felt heavy with trepidation. The ritual carried distasteful overtones. Guyal's step faltered.

The Castellan seized his elbow with a hard hand. 'Forward.'

The faces along the lane swam with morbid curiosity, inner excitement.

The eminence, with the tall trees and carved dark houses, was at his back; he walked out into the claret sunlight of the tundra. Eighty women in white gowns with ceremonial buckets of woven straw over their heads surrounded a tall tent of yellow silk. Here the Castellan halted Guyal and beckoned to the Ritual Matron. She flung back the hangings at the door of the tent; Shierl came slowly forth, eyes dark with fright. She wore a stiff gown of yellow brocade, and the wand of her body seemed pent and constrained within. She stared at Guyal, at her father, as if she had never seen

them before. The Ritual Matron put a hand on her waist, propelled her forward. Shierl stepped once, twice, irresolutely halted. The Castellan brought Guyal forward and placed him at the girl's side; now two children, a boy and a girl, came hastening up with cups which they proffered to Guyal and Shierl. Dully she accepted the cup. Guyal glanced suspiciously at the murky brew. He asked the Castellan: 'What is the nature of this potion?'

'Drink,' said the Castellan. 'So will your way seem the shorter; you will march to the Museum with a steadier step.'

'I will not drink,' said Guyal. 'My senses must be my own when I meet the Curator. I have come far for the privilege; I would not stultify the occasion stumbling and staggering.'

Shierl stared dully at the cup she held. Said Guyal: 'I advise you likewise to avoid the drug; so will we come to the Museum of Man with our dignity.'

She returned the cup. The Castellan's brow clouded, but he made no protest.

An old man in a black costume brought forward a satin pillow on which rested a whip with a handle of carved steel. The Castellan now lifted this whip, and advancing, laid three light strokes across the shoulders of both Shierl and Guyal.

'Now,' said the Castellan, 'go from Issane outlawed forever. Seek succor at the Museum of Man. Never look back, leave all thoughts of past and future here. Go, I command; go, go, go!'

Shierl sunk her teeth into her lower lip; tears coursed her cheek though she made no sound. With hanging head she started across the tundra. Guyal, with a swift stride, joined her.

For a space the murmurs, the nervous sounds followed their ears; then they were alone. The north lay across the horizon; the tundra filled the foreground and background, an expanse dreary and dun. The Museum of Man rose before them; along the faint trail they walked.

Guyal said in a tentative tone, 'There is much I would understand.'

'Speak,' said Shierl.

'Why are we forced to this mission?'

'It is thus because it has always been thus. Is this not reason enough?'

'Sufficient possibly for you,' said Guyal, 'but not for me. In fact, my thirst for knowledge drew me here, to find the Museum of Man.'

She looked at him in wonder. 'Are all to the south as scholarly as you?'

'In no degree,' said Guyal. 'The habitants perform the acts which fed them yesterday, last week, a year ago. "Why strive for a pedant's accumulation?" I have been asked. "Why seek and search? Earth grows cold; man gasps his last; why forgo merriment, music, and revelry for the abstract?" '

'Indeed,' said Shierl. 'Such is the consensus at Issane. But ask what you will; I will try to answer.'

He studied the charming triangle of her face, the heavy black hair, the lustrous eyes, dark as sapphires. 'In happier circumstances, there would be other yearnings for you to ease.'

'Ask,' said Shierl of Issane. 'The Museum of Man is close; there is occasion for naught but words.'

'Why are we thus sent to the Museum?'

'The immediate cause is the ghost you saw on the hill. When the ghost appears, then we of Issane know that the most beautiful maiden and the most handsome youth must be dispatched to the Museum. The basis of the custom I do not know. So it is; so it has been; so it will be till the sun gutters out like a coal in the rain.'

'But what is our mission? Who greets us, what is our fate?'

'Such details are unknown.'

Guyal mused, 'The likelihood of pleasure seems small... You are beyond doubt the loveliest creature of the Saponids, the loveliest creature of Earth – but I, a casual stranger, am hardly the most well-favored youth of the town.'

She smiled. 'You are not uncomely.'

Guyal said somberly, 'More cogent is the fact that I am a stranger and so bring little loss to Issane.'

'That aspect has no doubt been considered.'

Guyal scanned the horizon. 'Let us then avoid the Museum of Man, let us circumvent this unknown fate and take to the mountains.'

She shook her head. 'Do you suppose that we would gain by the ruse? The eyes of a hundred warriors will follow until we pass through the portals of the Museum. Should we attempt to avoid our duty we should be bound to stakes, stripped of our skins by the inch, and at last placed in bags with a thousand scorpions. Such is the traditional penalty; twelve times in history has it been invoked.'

Guyal threw back his shoulders. He spoke in a nervous voice, 'Ah, well – the Museum of Man has been my goal for many years. On this motive I set forth from Sfere, so now I would seek the Curator and satisfy my obsession for brain-filling.'

'You are blessed with great fortune,' said Shierl, 'for you are being granted your heart's desire.'

Guyal could find nothing to say, so for a space they walked in silence.

Presently she touched his arm. 'Guyal, I am greatly frightened.'

Guyal gazed at the ground beneath his feet, and a blossom of hope sprang alive in his brain. 'See the marking through the lichen?'

'Yes; what then?'

'Is it a trail?'

Dubiously she responded, 'It is a way worn by the passage of many feet. So then – it is a trail.'

'Here then is safety,' declared Guyal. 'But I must guard you; you must never leave my side, you must swim in the charm which protects me; perhaps then we will survive.'

Shierl said sadly, 'Let us not delude our reason, Guyal of Sfere.'

But as they walked, the trail grew plainer, and Guyal became correspondingly sanguine. And ever larger bulked the crumble that marked the Museum of Man.

If a storehouse of knowledge had existed here, little sign remained. There was a great flat floor, flagged in white stone, now chalky, broken and grown over with weeds. The sur-

rounding monoliths, pocked and worn, were toppled off at various heights. The rains had washed the marble, the dust from the mountains had been laid on and swept off, laid on and swept off, and those who had built the Museum were less than a mote of this dust, so far and forgotten were they.

'Think,' said Guyal, 'think of the vastness of knowledge which once was gathered here and which is now one with the soil – unless, of course, the Curator has salvaged and preserved.'

Shierl looked about apprehensively. 'I think rather of the portal, and that which awaits us... Guyal,' she whispered, 'I fear, I fear greatly... Suppose they tear us apart? Suppose there is torture and death? I fear a tremendous impingement.'

Guyal's own throat was hot and full. He looked about with challenge. 'While I still breathe and hold power in my arms to fight, there will be none to harm us.'

Shierl groaned softly. 'Guyal, Guyal, Guyal of Sfere – why did you choose me?'

'Because,' said Guyal, 'you were the loveliest and I thought nothing but good in store for you.'

Shierl said, 'I must be courageous; after all, if it were not I it would be some other maid equally fearful... And there is the portal.'

Guyal inhaled deeply, inclined his head, and strode forward. 'Let us be to it, and know.'

The portal opened into a wall supporting the first floor; a door of flat black metal. Guyal followed the trail to the door and rapped staunchly with his fist on the small copper gong to the side.

The door groaned wide on its hinges, and cool air, smelling of the under-earth, billowed forth.

'Hello within!' cried Guyal.

A soft voice, full of catches and quavers, as if just after weeping, said, 'Come you, come you forward. You are desired and awaited.'

Guyal leaned his head forward, straining to see. 'Give us light, that we may not wander from the trail and bottom ourselves.'

The breathless quaver of a voice said, 'Light is not needed; anywhere you step, that will be your trail, by an arrangement so agreed with the Way-Maker.'

'No,' said Guyal, 'we would see the visage of our host. We come at his invitation; the minimum of his courtesy is light; light there must be before we set foot inside the dungeon. Know we come as seekers after knowledge; we are visitors to be honored.'

'Ah, knowledge, knowledge,' came the sad breathlessness. 'That shall be yours, in fullness; oh, you shall swim in a tide of knowledge—'

Guyal interrupted the sad, sighing voice. 'Are you the Curator? Hundreds of leagues have I come to know the Curator and put him my inquiries. Are you he?'

'By no means. I revile the name of the Curator as a non-essential.'

'Who then may you be?'

'I am no one, nothing. I am an abstraction, an emotion, the shake in the air when a scream has departed.'

'You speak with the voice of man.'

'Why not? Such things as I speak lie in the dearest center of the human brain.'

Guyal said in a subdued voice, 'You do not make your invitation as enticing as might be hoped.'

'No matter, no matter; enter you must, into the dark and on the instant.'

'If light there be, we enter.'

'No light, no insolent scorch, is ever found in the Museum.'

'In this case,' said Guyal, drawing forth his Scintillant Dagger, 'I innovate a welcome reform. For see, now there is light!'

From the under-pommel issued a searching glare; the ghost tall before them screeched and fell into twinkling ribbons like pulverized tinsel. There were a few vagrant motes in the air; he was gone.

Shierl, who had stood stark and stiff as one mesmerized, gasped a soft warm gasp and fell against Guyal. 'How can you be so defiant?'

Guyal said in a voice half-laugh, half-quaver, 'In truth I do not know... Perhaps I find it incredible that I should come from Sfere, through forest and across crag, into the northern waste, merely to play the role of victim. I disbelieve; I am bold.'

He moved the dagger to right and left, and they saw themselves to be at the portal of a keep, cut from concreted rock. At the back opened a black depth. Crossing the floor swiftly, Guyal kneeled and listened.

He heard no sound. Shierl, at his back, stared with eyes as black and deep as the pit itself.

Leaning with his glowing dagger, Guyal saw a crazy rack of stairs voyaging down into the dark, and his light showed them and their shadows in so confusing a guise that he blinked and drew back.

Shierl said, 'What do you fear?'

Guyal rose. 'We are momentarily untended here in the Museum of Man. If we stay here we shall be once more arranged in harmony with the hostile pattern. If we go forward boldly we may come to a position of advantage. I propose that we descend these stairs and seek the Curator.'

'But does he exist?'

'The ghost spoke fervently against him.'

'Let us go, then,' said Shierl. 'I am resigned.'

'We go.'

They started down the stairs.

Back, forth, back, forth, down flights at varying angles, stages of varying heights, treads at varying widths, so that each step was a matter for concentration. Back, forth, down, down, down, and the black barred shadows moved and jerked in bizarre modes on the wall.

The flight ended; they stood in a room similar to the entry above, facing another black door, polished at one spot by use. On the walls to either side brass plaques carried messages in unfamiliar characters.

Guyal opened the door against a pressure of cold air, which, blowing through the aperture, made a slight rush, ceasing when Guyal opened the door farther.

'Listen.'

It was a far sound, an intermittent clacking, and it raised

the hairs at Guyal's neck. He felt Shierl's hand gripping his with clammy pressure.

Dimming the dagger's glow to a glimmer, Guyal passed through the door, with Shierl coming after. From afar came the evil sound, and by the echoes they knew they stood in a great hall.

Guyal directed the light to the floor: it was of a black resilient material. Next the wall: polished stone. He permitted the light to glow in the direction opposite to the sound, and a few paces distant they saw a bulky black case, studded with copper bosses.

With the purpose of the black case not apparent, they followed the wall, and as they walked similar cases appeared, looming heavy and dull, at regular intervals. The clacking receded as they walked; then they came to a right angle, and turning the corner, they seemed to approach the sound. Black case after black case passed; slowly, tense as foxes, they walked, eyes groping for sight through the darkness.

The wall made another angle, and here there was a door. Guyal hesitated. To follow the new direction of the wall would mean approaching the source of the sound. Would it be better to discover the worst quickly or to reconnoiter as they went?

He propounded the dilemma to Shierl, who shrugged. 'It is all one; sooner or later the ghosts will flit down to pluck at us; then we are lost.'

'Not while I possess light to stare them away to wisps and shreds,' said Guyal. 'Now I would find the Curator. Possibly he is behind this door. We will so discover.'

He laid his shoulder to the door; it eased ajar with a crack of golden light. Guyal peered through. He sighed, a muffled sound of wonder.

Now he opened the door farther; Shierl clutched at his arm.

'This is the Museum,' said Guyal in rapt tone. 'Here there is no danger.' He flung wide the door.

The light came from an unknown source, from the air itself, as if leaking from the discrete atoms; every breath was luminous, the room floated full of invigorating glow. Beautiful works of human fashioning ranked the walls: panels of

rich woods; scenes of olden times; formulas of color, designed to convey emotion rather than reality. Here were representations of three hundred marvelous flowers no longer extant on waning Earth; as many star-burst patterns; a multitude of other creations.

The door thudded softly behind them; the two from Earth's final time moved forward through the hall.

'Somewhere near must be the Curator,' whispered Guyal. 'There has been careful tending and great effort here.'

'Look.'

Opposite was a door which Guyal was unable to open, for it bore no latch, key, handle, knob, or bar. He rapped with his knuckles and waited; no sound returned.

Shierl tugged at his arm. 'These are private regions. It is best not to venture too rudely.'

Guyal turned away and they continued down the gallery, past the real expression of man's brightest dreamings, until the concentration of so much fire and spirit put them into awe. 'Great minds lie on the dust,' said Guyal. 'Gorgeous souls have vanished. Nevermore will there be the like.'

The room turned a corner, widened. And now the clacking sound they had noticed in the dark outer hall returned, louder, more suggestive of unpleasantness. It seemed to enter the gallery through an arched doorway opposite.

Guyal moved quietly to this door, with Shierl at his heels, and so they peered into the next chamber.

A great face looked from the wall, a face taller than Guyal, as tall as Guyal might reach with hands on high. The chin rested on the floor, the scalp slanted back into the panel.

Guyal stared, taken aback. In this pageant of beautiful objects, the grotesque visage was the disparity and dissonance a lunatic might have created. Ugly and vile was the face. The skin shone a gun-metal sheen, the eyes gazed from slanting folds. The nose was a lump, the mouth a pulp.

Guyal turned to Shierl. 'Does this not seem an odd work to be honored here in the Museum of Man?'

With hands jerking, she grabbed his arm, staggered back into the gallery.

'Guyal,' she cried, 'Guyal, come away!'

He faced her in surprise. 'What are you saying?'

'That horrible thing in there—'

'The diseased effort of an elder artist.'

'It lives.'

'How is this?'

'It lives!' she babbled. 'It looked at me, then looked at you.'

Guyal shrugged off her hand; in disbelief he looked through the doorway.

The face had changed. The torpor had evaporated; the glaze had departed the eye. The mouth squirmed; a hiss of escaping gas sounded. The mouth opened; a gray tongue protruded, and from this tongue darted a tendril. It terminated in a grasping hand, which groped for Guyal's neck. He jumped aside; the hand missed its clutch, the tendril coiled.

Guyal sprang back into the gallery. The hand seized Shierl, grasped her ankle. The eyes glistened; and now the flabby tongue sprouted a new member... Shierl stumbled, fell limp, her eyes staring, foam at her lips. Guyal shouting in a voice he could not hear, ran forward with his dagger. He cut at the gray wrist, but his knife sprang away as if the steel itself were horrified. He seized the tendril; with a mighty effort he broke it against his knee.

The face winced, the tendril jerked back. Guyal dragged Shierl into the gallery, back out of reach.

Through the doorway now, Guyal glared in hate and fear. The mouth had closed; it sneered disappointment. From the dank nostril oozed a wisp of white which swirled, writhed, formed a tall thing in a white robe – a thing with a drawn face and eyes like holes in a skull. Whimpering and mewing in distaste for the light, it wavered forward into the gallery, moving with curious little pauses and hesitancies.

Guyal stood still. Fear had exceeded its power; fear no longer persuaded. A brain could react only to the maximum of its intensity; how could this thing harm him now? He would smash it with his hands, beat it into sighing fog.

'Hold, hold, hold!' came a new voice. 'Hold, hold, hold. My charms and tokens, an ill day for Thorsingol... Be off with you, ghost, back to the orifice, back, I say! Go, else I

loose the actinics; trespass is not allowed, by supreme command from the Lycurgat; aye, the Lycurgat of Thorsingol.' This was the voice of the old man who had hobbled into the gallery.

Back to the snoring face wandered the ghost, and let itself be sucked up into the nostril.

The face rumbled and belched a white fiery lick, flapping at the old man who moved not an inch. From a rod high on the door frame came a whirling disk of golden sparks, which cut and dismembered the white sheet, destroyed it back to the mouth of the face, whence now issued a black bar. This bar edged into the whirling disk and absorbed the sparks. There was an instant of dead silence.

Then the old man crowed, 'Ah, you evil episode; you seek to interrupt my tenure. My clever baton holds you in abeyance; you are as naught. Disengage! Retreat into Jeldred!'

The mouth opened to display a gray viscous cavern; the eyes glittered in titanic emotion. The mouth yelled, a wave of sound to buffet the head and drive shock like a nail into the mind.

The baton sprayed a mist; the sound was captured and consumed; it was never heard.

The old man said, 'You are captious today! You would disturb poor old Kerlin in his duties? So ho. Baton!' He turned and peered at the rod. 'You have tasted that sound? Spew out a penalty.'

The fog balled, struck at the nose, buried itself in the pulp. An explosion; the face seethed; the nose was a clutter of shredded gray plasms. They waved like starfish arms and grew together once more, and now the nose was pointed like a cone.

Kerlin the Curator laughed, a shrill yammer on a single tone. He stopped short and the laugh vanished as if it had never begun. He turned to Guyal and Shierl, who stood pressed together in the door frame.

'How now? You are after the gong; the study hours are ended. Why do you linger?' He shook a stern finger. 'The Museum is not the site for roguery; this I admonish. So now

be off, home to Thorsingol; be more prompt the next time; you disturb the order...' He paused and threw a fretful glance over his shoulder. 'The day has gone ill; the Nocturnal Key-keeper is inexcusably late... I have waited an hour on the sluggard; the Lycurgat shall be so informed. I would be home to couch and hearth; here is ill use for old Kerlin. And, further, the encroachment of you two laggards; away now, and be off; out into the twilight!' And he advanced, making directive motions with his hands.

Guyal said, 'My lord Curator, I must speak with you.'

The old man halted, peered. 'Eh? What now? At the end of a long day's effort? No, no, you are out of order; regulation must be observed. Attend my audiarium at the fourth circuit tomorrow morning; then we shall hear you. So go now, go.'

Guyal stood back, nonplussed. Shierl fell on her knees. 'Sir Curator, we beg you for help; we have no place to go.'

Kerlin the Curator looked at her blankly. 'No place to go! What folly you utter! Go to your domicile, or to the Pubescentarium, or to the Temple, or to the Outward Inn. The Museum is no casual tavern.'

'My lord,' cried Guyal desperately, 'will you hear me? We speak from emergency.'

'Say on then.'

'Some malignancy has bewitched your brain. Will you credit this?'

'Ah, indeed?' ruminated the Curator.

'There is no Thorsingol. There is naught but dark waste. Your city is an aeon gone.'

The Curator smiled benevolently. 'A sad case. So it is with these younger minds.' He shook his head. 'My duty is clear. Tired bones, you must wait your rest. Fatigue – begone; duty to humanity makes demands; here is madness to be countered and cleared. And in any event the Nocturnal Key-keeper is not here to relieve me of my tedium.' He beckoned. 'Come.'

Hesitantly, Guyal and Shierl followed him. He opened one of his doors, passed through muttering and expostulating. Guyal and Shierl came after.

The room was cubical, floored with dull black stuff. A

hooded chair occupied the center of the room and beside it was a chest-high lectern whose face displayed a number of toggles and knurled wheels.

'This is the Curator's own Chair of Clarity,' explained Kerlin. 'As such it will, upon proper adjustment, impose the Pattern of Hynomeneural Clarity.' He manipulated the manuals. 'Now, if you will compose yourself I will repair your hallucination. It is beyond my call of duty, but I would not be spoken of as mean or unwilling.'

Guyal inquired anxiously, 'Lord Curator, this Chair of Clarity, how will it affect me?'

Kerlin the Curator said grandly, 'The fibers of your brain are snarled and frayed, and so make contact with unintentional areas. By the marvelous craft of our modern cerebrologists this hood will compose your synapses with the correct readings from the library – those of normality, you must understand – and so repair the skein, and make you once more a whole man.'

'Once I sit in the chair,' Guyal inquired, 'What will you do?'

'Merely close this contact, engage this arm, throw in this toggle – then you daze. In thirty seconds, this bulb glows, signaling the success and completion of the treatment. Then I reverse the manipulation and you arise a creature of renewed sanity.'

Guyal looked at Shierl. 'Did you hear and comprehend?'

'Yes, Guyal.'

'Remember.' Then to the Curator: 'Marvelous. But how must I sit?'

'Merely relax in the seat. Then I pull the hood slightly forward, to shield the eyes from distraction.'

Guyal leaned forward, peered gingerly into the hood. 'I fear I do not understand.'

The Curator hopped forward impatiently. 'It is an act of the utmost facility. Like this.' He sat in the chair.

'And how will the hood be applied?'

'In this wise.' Kerlin seized a handle, pulled the shield over his face.

'Quick,' said Guyal to Shierl. She sprang to the lectern; Kerlin the Curator made a motion to release the hood; Guyal

seized the spindly frame, held it. Shierl flung the switches; the Curator relaxed, sighed.

Shierl gazed at Guyal, dark eyes wide and liquid as the great water-flamerian of South Almery. 'Is he ... dead?'

'I hope not.'

They gazed uncertainly at the relaxed form. Seconds passed.

A clanging voice sounded from afar – a crash, a wrench, an exultant bellow.

Guyal rushed to the door. Prancing, wavering, sidling into the gallery came a dozen ghosts; through the open door behind, Guyal could see the great head. It was shoving out, pushing into the room. Great ears appeared, part of a neck, wreathed with purple wattles. The wall cracked, sagged, crumbled. A great hand thrust through, a forearm...'

Shierl screamed. Guyal, pale and quivering, slammed the door in the face of the nearest ghost. It seeped around the jamb, wisp by wisp.

Guyal sprang to the lectern. The bulb showed dullness. Guyal's hands twitched along the controls. 'Only Kerlin's awareness controls the magic of the baton,' he panted. 'So much is clear.' He stared into the bulb with agonized urgency.

'Glow, bulb, glow...'

The bulb glowed. With a sharp cry Guyal returned the switches to neutrality, jumped down, flung up the hood.

Kerlin the Curator sat looking at him.

Behind, the ghost formed itself – a tall white thing in white robes, and the dark eye-holes stared like outlets into nonimagination.

Kerlin the Curator sat looking.

The ghost moved under the robes. A hand like a bird's foot appeared, holding a clod of dingy matter. The ghost cast the matter to the floor; it exploded into a puff of black dust. The motes of the cloud grew, became a myriad of wriggling insects. With one accord they darted across the floor, growing as they spread, and became scuttling creatures with monkey-heads.

Kerlin the Curator moved. 'Baton,' he said. He held up his hand. It held the baton. The baton spat an orange gout –

red dust. It puffed before the rushing horde and each mote became a red scorpion. So ensued a ferocious battle, and little shrieks and chittering sounds rose from the floor.

The monkey-headed things were killed, routed. The ghost sighed, moved his claw-hand once more. But the baton spat forth a ray of purest light and the ghost sloughed into nothingness.

'Kerlin!' cried Guyal. 'The demon is breaking into the gallery.'

Kerlin flung open the door, stepped forth.

'Baton,' said Kerlin, 'perform thy utmost.'

The demon said, 'No, Kerlin, hold the magic; I thought you dazed. Now I retreat.'

With a vast quaking and heaving he pulled back until once more only his face showed through the hole.

'Baton,' said Kerlin, 'rest on guard.'

The baton disappeared from his hand.

Kerlin turned and faced Guyal and Shierl.

'There is need for many words, for now I die. I die, and the Museum shall lie alone. So let us speak quickly, quickly, quickly...'

Kerlin moved with feeble steps to a portal which snapped aside as he approached. Guyal and Shierl stood hesitantly to the rear.

'Come, come,' said Kerlin in sharp impatience. 'My strength flags, I die. You have been my death.'

Guyal moved slowly forward, with Shierl half a pace behind.

Kerlin surveyed them with a thin grin. 'Halt your misgivings and hasten; I wane; my sight flickers...'

He waved a despairing hand, then, turning, led them into the inner chamber where he slumped into a great chair. With many uneasy glances at the door Guyal and Shierl settled upon a padded couch.

Kerlin jeered in a feeble voice, 'You fear the white phantasms? Poh, they are held from the gallery by the baton. Only when I am smitten out of mind – or dead – will the baton cease its function. You must know,' he added with somewhat more vigor, 'that the energies and dynamics do not channel from my brain but from the central

potentium of the Museum, which is perpetual; I merely direct and order the rod.'

'But this demon – who or what is he? Why does he come to look through the walls?'

'He is Blikdak, of the demon-world Jeldred. He wrenched the hole intent on taking the knowledge of the Museum into his mind, but I forestalled him; so he sits waiting in the hole till I die. Then he will glut himself with erudition to the great disadvantage of men.'

'Why cannot this demon be exhorted hence and the hole abolished?'

Kerlin the Curator shook his head. 'The furious powers I control are not valid in the air of the demon-world, where substance and form are of different entity. So far as you see him, he has brought his environment with him; so far he is safe. When he ventures farther the power of Earth dissolves the Jeldred mode; then may I strike him with fervor from the potentium... But enough of Blikdak; tell me, what is the news of Thorsingol?'

Guyal said in a halting voice, 'Thorsingol is passed beyond memory. There is naught above but arid tundra and the old town of the Saponids. This girl Shierl is of the Saponids; we came to the Museum at the behest of Blikdak's ghosts.'

'Ah,' breathed Kerlin, 'have I been so aimless? These youthful shapes by which Blikdak relieved his tedium : they flit down my memory like May flies... I put them aside as creatures of his own conception.'

Shierl grimaced. 'What use to him are human creatures?'

Kerlin said dully, 'Blikdak is past your conceiving. These human creatures are his play, on whom he practices various junctures, nauseas, antics, and at last struggles to the death. Then he sends forth a ghost demanding further youth and beauty.'

Guyal said in puzzlement, 'Such acts would seem derangements of humanity. They are anthropoid by the very nature of the functioning organs. Since Blikdak is a demon—'

'Consider him!' spoke Kerlin. 'His lineaments, his apparatus. He is nothing else but anthropoid, and such is his origin, together with all the demons, frits, and winged glowing-eyed creatures that infest latter-day Earth. Blik-

dak, like the others, derives from the mind of man. The condensation, the cloacal humors, the scatophiliac whims that have drained through humanity formed a vast tumor; so Blikdak assumed his being. But of Blikdak, enough. I die, I die!' He sank into the chair with heaving chest. 'My eyes vary and waver. My breath is shallow as a bird's, my bones are the pith of an old vine. I have lived beyond knowledge; in my madness I knew no passage of time. Now I remember the years and centuries, the millennia, the epochs – they are like quick glimpses through a shutter. Curing my madness, you have killed me.'

'But when you die,' cried Shierl, 'what then?'

Guyal asked, 'In the Museum of Man are there no exorcisms to dissolve this demon?'

'Blikdak must be eradicated,' said Kerlin. 'Then will I die in ease; then must you assume the care of the Museum.' He licked his white lips. 'An ancient principle specifies that, in order to destroy a substance the nature of the substance must be determined. In short, before Blikdak may be dissolved, we must discover his nature.' And his eyes moved glassily to Guyal.

'Your pronouncement is sound beyond argument,' admitted Guyal, 'but how may this be accomplished? Blikdak will never submit to investigation.'

'No; there must be subterfuge, some instrumentality...'

'The ghosts are part of Blikdak's stuff?'

'Indeed.'

'Can the ghosts be stayed and prevented?'

'Indeed; in a box of light, the which I can effect by a thought. Yes, a ghost we must have.' Kerlin raised his head. 'Baton! One ghost; admit a ghost!'

A moment passed: Kerlin held up his hand. There was a faint scratch at the door and a soft whine. 'Open,' said a voice, full of sobs and catches and quavers. 'Open and let forth the youthful creatures.'

Kerlin laboriously rose to his feet. 'It is done.'

From behind the door came a sad voice, 'I am pent, I am snared in scorching brilliance!'

'Now we experiment,' said Guyal. 'What dissolves the ghost dissolves Blikdak.'

'True indeed,' assented Kerlin.

'Why not light?' inquired Shierl. 'Light parts the fabric of the ghosts as wind tatters the fog.'

'But merely for their fragility; Blikdak is harsh and solid.' Kerlin mused. After a moment he gestured to the door. 'We go to the image-expander; there we will explode the ghost to macroid dimension; so shall we find his basis. Guyal of Sfere, you must support my frailness; my limbs are weak as wax.'

On Guyal's arm he tottered forward, and with Shierl close at their heels they gained the gallery. Here the ghost wept in its cage of light, and searched constantly for a dark aperture to seep his essence through.

Paying him no heed Kerlin hobbled and limped across the gallery. In their wake followed the box of light and perforce the ghost.

'Open the great door,' cried Kerlin in a voice beset with cracking and hoarseness. 'The great door into the Cognitive Repository!'

Shierl ran ahead and thrust her force against the door; it slid aside, and they looked into the great dark hall, and the golden light from the gallery dwindled into the shadows and was lost.

'Call for light,' Kerlin said.

'Light!' cried Guyal.

Illumination came to the great hall, and it proved so tall that pilasters along the wall dwindled to threads, and so long and wide that perspective was distorted. Spaced in equal rows were the black cases with the copper bosses that Guyal and Shierl had noted on their entry. Above each hung five similar cases, precisely fixed, floating without support.

'What are these?' asked Guyal.

'Would my poor brain encompassed a hundredth part of what these banks know,' panted Kerlin. 'They are repositories crammed with all that has been experienced, achieved, or recorded by man. Here is the lost lore, early and late, the fabulous imaginings, the history of ten million cities, the beginnings of time and the presumed finalities; the reason for human existence and the reason for the reason. Daily I have labored and toiled in these banks; my achievement has

been a synopsis of the most superficial sort: a panorama across a wide and multifarious country.'

Said Shierl, 'Would not the craft to destroy Blikdak be contained here?'

'Indeed, indeed; our task would be merely to find the information. Under which casing would we search? Consider these categories: Demon-lands; Killings and Mortefactions; Expositions and Dissolutions of Evil; History of Granvilunde (where such an entity was repelled); Attractive and Detractive Hyperordnets; Therapy for Hallucinations and Ghost-takers; Constructive Journal, item for regeneration of burst walls, subdivision for invasion by demons; Procedural Suggestions in Time of Risk... Aye, these and a thousand more. Somewhere is knowledge. But where to look? There is no Index Major; none except the poor synopsis of my compilation. He who seeks specific knowledge must often go on an extended search...' His voice trailed off. Then: 'Forward! Forward through the banks to the Mechanismus.'

So through the banks they went, like roaches in a maze, and behind drifted the cage of light with the wailing ghost. At last they entered a chamber smelling of metal; again Kerlin instructed Guyal and Guyal called for light.

At a tall booth Kerlin halted the cage of light. A pane dropped before the ghost. 'Observe now,' Kerlin said, and manipulated the activants.

They saw the ghost, depicted and projected: the flowing robe, the haggard visage. The face grew large, flattened; a segment under the vacant eye became a scabrous white place. It separated into pustules, and a single pustule swelled to fill the pane. The crater of the pustule was an intricate stippled surface, a mesh as of fabric, knit in a lacy pattern.

'Behold!' said Shierl. 'He is a thing woven as if by thread.'

Guyal turned eagerly to Kerlin; Kerlin raised a finger. 'Indeed, indeed, a goodly thought, especially since here beside us is a rotor of extreme swiftness, used in reeling the cognitive filaments of the cases... Now then observe: I reach to this panel, I select a mesh, I withdraw a thread,

and note! The meshes ravel and loosen and part. And now to the bobbin on the rotor, and I wrap the thread, and now with a twist we have the cincture made. . .'

Shierl said dubiously, 'Does not the ghost observe and note your doing?'

'The pane shields our actions; he is too exercised to attend. And now I dissolve the cage and he is free.'

The ghost wandered forth, cringing from the light.

'Go!' cried Kerlin. 'Back to your genetrix, back, return and go!'

The ghost departed. Kerlin said to Guyal, 'Follow; find when Blikdak snuffs him up.'

At a cautious distance Guyal watched the ghost seep up into the black nostril, and returned to where Kerlin waited by the rotor. 'The ghost has once more become part of Blikdak.'

'Now then,' said Kerlin, 'we cause the rotor to twist, the bobbin to whirl, and we shall observe.'

The rotor whirled to a blur; the bobbin (as long as Guyal's arm) became spun with ghost-thread, at first glowing pastel polychrome, then nacre, then fine milk-ivory.

The rotor spun, a million times a minute, and the thread drawn unseen and unknown from Blikdak thickened on the bobbin.

The rotor spun; the bobbin was full – a cylinder shining with glossy silken sheen. Kerlin slowed the rotor: Guyal snapped a new bobbin into place, and the unravelling of Blikdak continued.

Three bobbins – four – four – five – and Guyal, observing Blikdak from afar, found the giant face quiescent, the mouth working and sucking, creating the clacking sound which had first caused them apprehension.

Eight bobbins. Blikdak opened his eyes, stared in puzzlement around the chamber.

Twelve bobbins; a discolored spot appeared on the sagging cheek, and Blikdak quivered in uneasiness.

Twenty bobbins: the spot spread across Blikdak's visage, across the slanted fore-dome, and his mouth hung lax; he hissed and fretted.

Thirty bobbins: Blikdak's head seemed stale and putrid;

the gunmetal sheen had become an angry maroon, the eyes bulged, the mouth hung open, the tongue lolled limp.

Fifty bobbins: Blikdak collapsed. His dome lowered against his mouth; his eyes shone like feverish coals.

Sixty bobbins, seventy bobbins; Blikdak was no more. The breach in the wall gave on barren rock, unbroken and rigid.

And in the Mechanismus seventy shining bobbins lay stacked.

Kerlin fell back against the wall. 'My time has come. I have guarded the Museum; together we have won it from Blikdak... Attend me now. Into your hands I pass the curacy; now the Museum is your charge to guard and preserve.'

'For what end?' asked Shierl. 'Earth expires, almost as you... Wherefore knowledge?'

'More now than ever,' gasped Kerlin. 'Attend: the stars are bright, the stars are fair; the banks know blessed magic to fleet you to youthful climes. Now ... I go. I die.'

'Wait!' cried Guyal. 'Wait, I beseech!'

'Why wait?' whispered Kerlin. 'You call me back?'

'How do I extract from the banks?'

'The key to the index is in my chambers, the index of my life...' And Kerlin died.

Guyal and Shierl climbed to the upper ways and stood outside the portal on the ancient floor. It was night; the marble shone faintly underfoot, the broken columns loomed on the sky.

Across the plain the yellow lights of Issane shone warm through the trees; above in the sky shone the stars.

Guyal said to Shierl, 'There is your home; do you wish to return?'

She shook her head. 'We have looked through the eyes of knowledge. We have seen old Thorsingol, and the Sherrit Empire before it, and Golwan Andra before that, and the Forty Kades even before. We have seen the warlike green-men, and the knowledgeable Pharials and the Clambs who departed Earth for the stars, as did the Merioneth before them and the Gray Sorcerers still earlier. We have seen

oceans rise and fall, the mountains crust up, peak and melt in the beat of rain; we have looked on the sun when it glowed hot and full and yellow... No, Guyal, there is no place for me at Issane...'

Guyal, leaning back on the weathered pillar, looked up to the stars. 'Knowledge is ours, Shierl – all of knowing to our call. And what shall we do?'

Together they looked up to the white stars.

'What shall we do ...'

The Men Return

The Relict came furtively down the crag, a gaunt creature with tortured eyes. He moved in a series of quick dashes, using panels of dark air for concealment, running behind each passing shadow, at times crawling on all fours, head low to the ground. Arriving at the final low outcrop of rock, he halted and peered across the plain.

Far away rose low hills, blurring into the sky, which was mottled and sallow like poor milk-glass. The intervening plain spread like rotten black velvet. A fountain of liquid rock jetted high in the air. In the middle distance a family of gray objects evolved with a sense of purposeful destiny: spheres melted into pyramids, became domes, tufts of white spires, sky-piercing poles; then, as a final *tour de force*, tesseracts.

The Relict cared nothing for this; he needed food and out on the plain were plants. They would suffice in lieu of anything better. They grew in the ground, or sometimes on a floating lump of water, or surrounding a core of hard black gas. There were dank black flaps of leaf, clumps of haggard thorn, pale green bulbs, stalks with leaves and contorted flowers. There were no recognizable species, and the Relict had no means of knowing if the leaves and tendrils he had eaten yesterday would poison him today.

He tested the surface of the plain with his foot. The glassy surface (though it likewise seemed a construction of red and gray-green pyramids) accepted his weight, then suddenly sucked at his leg. In a frenzy he tore himself free, jumped back, squatted on the temporarily solid rock.

Hunger rasped at his stomach. He must eat. He contemplated the plain. Not too far away a pair of Organisms played – sliding, diving, dancing, striking flamboyant poses.

Should they approach, he would try to kill one of them. They resembled men, and so should make a good meal.

He waited. A long time? A short time? It might have been either; duration had neither quantitative nor qualitative reality. The sun had vanished, and there was no standard cycle or recurrence. Time was a word blank of meaning.

Matters had not always been so. The Relict retained a few tattered recollections of the old days, before system and logic had been rendered obsolete. Man had dominated Earth by virtue of a single assumption: that an effect could be traced to a cause, itself the effect of a previous cause.

Manipulation of this basic law yielded rich results; there seemed no need for any other tool or instrumentality. Man congratulated himself on his generalized structure. He could live on desert, on plain or ice, in forest or in city; Nature had not shaped him to a special environment.

He was unaware of his vulnerability. Logic was the special environment; the brain was the special tool.

Then came the terrible hour when Earth swam into a pocket of noncausality, and all the ordered tensions of cause–effect dissolved. The special tool was useless; it had no purchase on reality. From the two billions of men, only a few survived – the mad. They were now the Organisms, lords of the era, their discords so exactly equivalent to the vagaries of the land as to constitute a peculiar wild wisdom. Or perhaps the disorganized matter of the world, loose from the old organization, was peculiarly sensitive to psychokinesis.

A handful of others, the Relicts, managed to exist, but only through a delicate set of circumstances. They were the ones most strongly charged with the old causal dynamic. It persisted sufficiently to control the metabolism of their bodies, but could extend no further. They were fast dying out, for sanity provided no leverage against the environment. Sometimes their own minds sputtered and jangled, and they would go raving and leaping out across the plain.

The Organisms observed with neither surprise nor curiosity; how could surprise exist? The mad Relict might pause by an Organism, and try to duplicate the creature's existence. The Organism ate a mouthful of plant; so did the

Relict. The Organism rubbed his feet with crushed water; so did the Relict. Presently the Relict would die of poison or rent bowels or skin lesions, while the Organism relaxed in the dank black grass. Or the Organism might seek to eat the Relict; and the Relict would run off in terror, unable to abide any part of the world – running, bounding, breasting the thick air; eyes wide, mouth open, calling and gasping until finally he foundered in a pool of black iron or blundered into a vacuum pocket, to bat around like a fly in a bottle.

The Relicts now numbered very few. Finn, he who crouched on the rock overlooking the plain, lived with four others. Two of these were old men and soon would die. Finn likewise would die unless he found food.

Out on the plain one of the Organisms, Alpha, sat down, caught a handful of air, a globe of blue liquid, a rock, kneaded them together, pulled the mixture like taffy, gave it a great heave. It uncoiled from his hand like rope. The Relict crouched low. No telling what devilry would occur in the creature. He and all the rest of them – unpredictable! The Relict valued their flesh as food; but the Organisms also would eat him if opportunity offered. In the competition he was at a great disadvantage. Their random acts baffled him. If, seeking to escape, he ran, the worst terror would begin. The direction he set his face was seldom the direction the varying frictions of the ground let him move. But the Organisms were as random and uncommitted as the environment, and the double set of disorders sometimes compounded, sometimes canceled each other. In the latter case the Organisms might catch him...

It was inexplicable. But then, what was not? The word 'explanation' had no meaning.

They were moving toward him; had they seen him? He flattened himself against the sullen yellow rock.

The two Organisms paused not far away. He could hear their sounds, and crouched, sick from conflicting pangs of hunger and fear.

Alpha sank to his knees, lay flat on his back, arms and legs flung out at random, addressing the sky in a series of musical cries, sibilants, guttural groans. It was a personal

language he had only now improvised, but Beta understood him well.

'A vision,' cried Alpha. 'I see past the sky. I see knots, spinning circles. They tighten into hard points; they will never come undone.'

Beta perched on a pyramid, glanced over his shoulder at the mottled sky.

'An intuition,' chanted Alpha, 'a picture out of the other time. It is hard, merciless, inflexible.'

Beta poised on the pyramid, dove through the glassy surface, swam under Alpha, emerged, lay flat beside him.

'Observe the Relict on the hillside. In his blood is the whole of the old race – the narrow men with minds like cracks. He has exuded the intuition. Clumsy thing – a blunderer,' said Alpha.

'They are all dead, all of them,' said Beta. 'Although three or four remain.' (When *past*, *present*, and *future* are no more than ideas left over from another era, like boats on a dry lake – then the completion of a process can never be defined.)

Alpha said, 'This is the vision. I see the Relicts swarming the Earth; then whisking off to nowhere, like gnats in the wind. That is behind us.'

The Organisms lay quiet, considering the vision.

A rock, or perhaps a meteor, fell from the sky, struck into the surface of the pond. It left a circular hole which slowly closed. From another part of the pool a gout of fluid splashed into the air, floated away.

Alpha spoke: 'Again – the intuition comes strong! There will be lights in the sky.'

The fever died in him. He hooked a finger into the air, hoisted himself to his feet.

Beta lay quiet. Slugs, ants, flies, beetles were crawling on him, boring, breeding. Alpha knew that Beta could arise, shake off the insects, stride off. But Beta seemed to prefer passivity. That was well enough. He could produce another Beta should he choose, or a dozen of him. Sometimes the world swarmed with Organisms, all sorts, all colors, tall as steeples, short and squat as flower pots.

'I feel a lack,' said Alpha. 'I will eat the Relict.' He set

forth, and sheer chance brought him near to the ledge of yellow rock. Finn the Relict sprang to his feet in panic.

Alpha tried to communicate so that Finn might pause while Alpha ate. But Finn had no grasp for the many-valued overtones of Alpha's voice. He seized a rock, hurled it at Alpha. The rock puffed into a cloud of dust, blew back into the Relict's face.

Alpha moved closer, extended his long arms. The Relict kicked. His feet went out from under him and he slid out on the plain. Alpha ambled complacently behind him. Finn began to crawl away. Alpha moved off to the right – one direction was as good as another. He collided with Beta and began to eat Beta instead of the Relict. The Relict hesitated; then approached and joining Alpha, pushed chunks of pink flesh into his mouth.

Alpha said to the Relict, 'I was about to communicate an intuition to him whom we dine upon. I will speak to you.'

Finn could not understand Alpha's personal language. He ate as rapidly as possible.

Alpha spoke again. 'There will be lights in the sky. The great lights.'

Finn rose to his feet and warily watching Alpha, seized Beta's legs, began to pull him toward the hill. Alpha watched with quizzical unconcern.

It was hard work for the spindly Relict. Sometimes Beta floated; sometimes he wafted off on the air; sometimes he adhered to the terrain. At last he sank into a knob of granite which froze around him. Finn tried to jerk Beta loose, and then to pry him up with a stick, without success.

He ran back and forth in an agony of indecision. Beta began to collapse, wither, like a jellyfish on hot sand. The Relict abandoned the hulk. Too late, too late! Food going to waste! The world was a hideous place of frustration!

Temporarily his belly was full. He started back up the crag, and presently found the camp, where the four other Relicts waited – two ancient males, two females. The females, Gisa and Reak, like Finn, had been out foraging. Gisa had brought in a slab of lichen; Reak a bit of nameless carrion.

The old men, Boad and Tagart, sat quietly waiting either for food or for death.

The women greeted Finn sullenly. 'Where is the food you went forth to find?'

'I had a whole carcass,' said Finn. 'I could not carry it.'

Boad had slyly stolen the slab of lichen and was cramming it into his mouth. It came alive, quivered, and exuded a red ichor which was poison, and the old man died.

'Now there is food,' said Finn. 'Let us eat.'

But the poison created a putrescence; the body seethed with blue foam, flowed away of its own energy.

The women turned to look at the other old man, who said in a quavering voice, 'Eat me if you must – but why not choose Reak, who is younger than I?'

Reak, the younger of the women, gnawing on the bit of carrion, made no reply.

Finn said hollowly, 'Why do we worry ourselves? Food is ever more difficult, and we are the last of all men.'

'No, no,' spoke Reak. 'Not the last. We saw others on the green mound.'

'That was long ago,' said Gisa. 'Now they are surely dead.'

'Perhaps they have found a source of food,' suggested Reak.

Finn rose to his feet, looked across the plain. 'Who knows? Perhaps there is a more pleasant land beyond the horizon.'

'There is nothing anywhere but waste and evil creatures,' snapped Gisa.

'What could be worse than here?' Finn argued calmly.

No one could find grounds for disagreement.

'Here is what I propose,' said Finn. 'Notice this tall peak. Notice the layers of hard air. They bump into the peak, they bounce off, they float in and out and disappear past the edge of sight. Let us all climb this peak, and when a sufficiently large bank of air passes, we will throw ourselves on top, and allow it to carry us to the beautiful regions which may exist just out of sight.'

There was argument. The old man Tagart protested his feebleness; the women derided the possibility of the

bountiful regions Finn envisioned, but presently, grumbling and arguing, they began to clamber up the pinnacle.

It took a long time; the obsidian was soft as jelly and Tagart several times professed himself at the limit of his endurance. But still they climbed, and at last reached the pinnacle. There was barely room to stand. They could see in all directions, far out over the landscape, till vision was lost in the watery gray.

The women bickered and pointed in various directions, but there was small sign of happier territory. In one direction blue-green hills shivered like bladders full of oil. In another direction lay a streak of black – a gorge or a lake of clay. In another direction were blue-green hills – the same they had seen in the first direction; somehow there had been a shift. Below was the plain, gleaming like an iridescent beetle, here and there pocked with black spots, overgrown with questionable vegetation.

They saw Organisms, a dozen shapes loitering by ponds, munching vegetable pods or small rocks or insects. There came Alpha. He moved slowly, still awed by his vision, ignoring the other Organisms. Their play went on, but presently they stood quiet, sharing the oppression.

On the obsidian peak, Finn caught hold of a passing filament of air, drew it in. 'Now – all on, and we sail away to the Land of Plenty.'

'No,' protested Gisa, 'there is no room, and who knows if it will fly in the right direction?'

'Where is the right direction?' asked Finn. 'Does anyone know?'

No one knew, but the women still refused to climb aboard the filament. Finn turned to Tagart. 'Here, old one, show these women how it is; climb on!'

'No, no,' Tagart cried. 'I fear the air; this is not for me.'

'Climb on, old man, then we follow.'

Wheezing and fearful, clenching his hands deep into the spongy mass, Tagart pulled himself out onto the air, spindly shanks hanging over into nothing. 'Now,' spoke Finn, 'who next?'

The women still refused. 'You go then, yourself,' cried Gisa.

'And leave you, my last guarantee against hunger? Aboard now!'

'No. The air is too small; let the old one go and we will follow on a larger.'

'Very well.' Finn released his grip. The air floated off over the plain, Tagart straddling and clutching for dear life.

They watched him curiously. 'Observe,' said Finn, 'how fast and easily moves the air. Above the Organisms, over all the slime and uncertainty.'

But the air itself was uncertain, and the old man's raft dissolved. Clutching at the departing wisps, Tagart sought to hold his cushion together. It fled from under him, and he fell.

On the peak the three watched the spindly shape flap and twist on its way to earth far below.

'Now,' Reak exclaimed in vexation, 'we even have no more meat.'

'None,' said Gisa, 'except the visionary Finn himself.'

They surveyed Finn. Together they would more than outmatch him.

'Careful,' cried Finn. 'I am the last of the Men. You are women, subject to my orders.'

They ignored him, muttering to each other, looking at him from the side of their faces.

'Careful!' cried Finn. 'I will throw you both from this peak.'

'That is what we plan for you,' said Gisa.

They advanced with sinister caution.

'Stop! I am the last Man!'

'We are better off without you.'

'One moment! Look at the Organisms!'

The women looked. The Organisms stood in a knot, staring at the sky.

'Look at the sky!'

The women looked; the frosted glass was cracking, breaking, curling aside.

'The blue! The blue sky of old times!'

A terribly bright light burnt down, seared their eyes. The rays warmed their naked backs.

'The sun,' they said in awed voices. 'The sun has come back to Earth.'

The shrouded sky was gone; the sun rode in a sea of blue. The ground below churned, cracked, heaved, solidified. They felt the obsidian harden under their feet; its color shifted to glossy black. The Earth, the sun, the galaxy, had departed the region of freedom; the other time with its restrictions and logic was once more with them.

'This is Old Earth,' cried Finn. 'We are Men of Old Earth! The land is once again ours!'

'And what of the Organisms?'

'If this is the Earth of old, then let the Organisms beware!'

The Organisms stood on a low rise of ground beside a runnel of water that was rapidly becoming a river flowing out onto the plain.

Alpha cried, 'Here is my intuition! It is exactly as I knew. The freedom is gone; the tightness, the constrictions are back!'

'How will we defeat it?' asked another Organism.

'Easily,' said a third. 'Each must fight a part of the battle. I plan to hurl myself at the sun, and blot it from existence.' And he crouched, threw himself into the air. He fell on his back and broke his neck.

'The fault,' said Alpha, 'is in the air, because the air surrounds all things.'

Six Organisms ran off in search of air and, stumbling into the river, drowned.

'In any event,' said Alpha, 'I am hungry.' He looked around for suitable food. He seized an insect which stung him. He dropped it. 'My hunger remains.'

He spied Finn and the two women descending from the crag. 'I will eat one of the Relicts,' he said. 'Come, let us all eat.'

Three of them started off – as usual in random directions. By chance Alpha came face to face with Finn. He prepared to eat, but Finn picked up a rock. The rock remained a rock, hard, sharp, heavy. Finn swung it down, taking joy in the inertia. Alpha died with a crushed skull. One of the other Organisms attempted to step across a crevasse twenty

feet wide and was engulfed; the other sat down, swallowed rocks to assuage his hunger and presently went into convulsions.

Finn pointed here and there around the fresh new land. 'In that quarter, the new city, like that of the legends. Over here the farms, the cattle.'

'We have none of these,' protested Gisa.

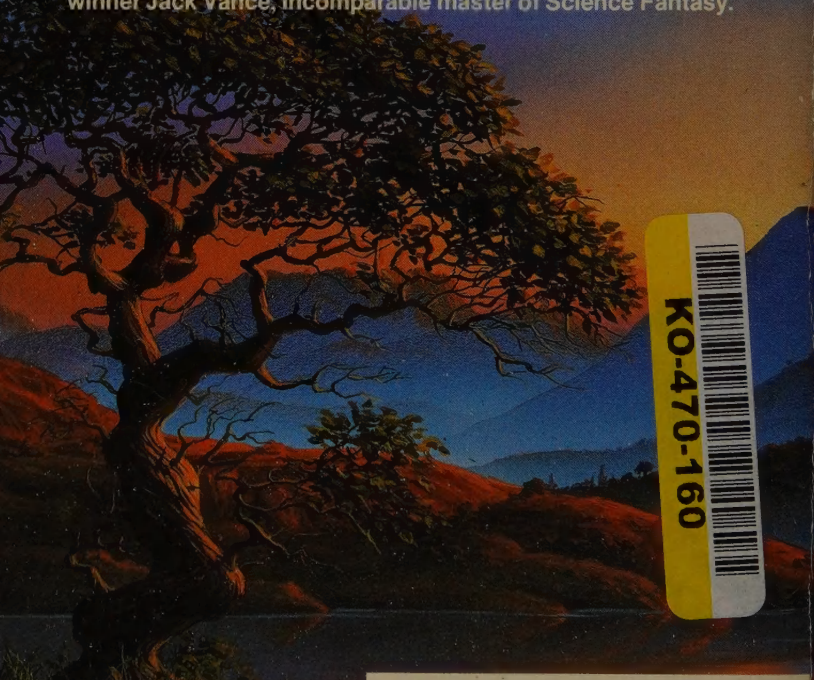
'No,' said Finn. 'Not now. But once more the sun rises and sets, once more rock has weight and air has none. Once more water falls as rain and flows to the sea.' He stepped forward over the fallen Organism. 'Let us make plans.'

THE ART OF JINXMANSHIP

On the desolate world of Pangborn, the violent descendants of marooned starship captains battle constantly for supremacy - in a mediaeval future where magic is as important a weapon as the axe and the broadsword. No warlord will fight without his jinxer, the martial magician whose powers must sway the battle where brain and muscle fail.

But now, as the mighty and ruthless Lord of Faide comes within reach of his goal of planetwide domination, Pangborn begins to fight back. And the jinxer stands impotent before beings that existed long before humanity came searching for conquests among the stars . . .

Here is the very best of cosmic adventure from Nebula and Hugo Award winner Jack Vance, incomparable master of Science Fantasy.



KO-470-160

Cover illustration by Peter Elson

ISBN 0-583-12498-4

00250

9 780583 124980

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY

UNITED KINGDOM £2.50
NEW ZEALAND $9.95 RRP INC. GST
AUSTRALIA $7.95 (recommended)